

New receiving countries and the European ‘mobility laboratory’: integration and family reunification aspirations among Ukrainians in Płock

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Poland has recently become a country with net immigration, thanks largely to an influx of labour migrants from all over Ukraine. This begs the question of how similar its experiences will be to those of European countries which made the same migration transition in the 20th century. The article explores how recently-arrived Ukrainians experience life in a medium-sized Polish city, Płock, which has itself only recently achieved net international immigration. I argue that one should not overplay Poland’s status as a new receiving country, differentiating it from established receiving countries such as the UK. In fact, there are many parallels between the experiences of migrants in the UK and Poland, primarily linked to 21st century opportunities to establish dynamic transnational migration networks. All receiving countries need to adjust to this unexpected situation. For the Ukrainian factory workers interviewed in this study, its most important aspect is that the majority aspire to bring their families to Poland – just as Polish families rapidly reunited abroad in the aftermath of Poland’s EU accession.

Keywords: Ukrainian migrants, migration transition, new receiving countries

Introduction

This article examines the perceptions and aspirations of international migrants in Poland, focusing on 25 Ukrainian circular migrants. They hardly mix with local society, yet almost all want to bring family members to Poland. The article sheds light on

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how migrants experience being in a country transitioning to receiving country status and, more broadly, on the European 'mobility laboratory'. It does so by drawing comparisons between Ukrainian migrants in Poland, which has recently acquired net immigration, and Poles in more established receiving countries of Western Europe. The main question addressed in the article is whether, how and why processes of migrants coming to feel at home in new receiving countries like Poland vary from the experiences of migrants in receiving countries of north-west Europe. Obviously, Górný (2019) is correct to emphasise the distinctions between temporary migrations of EU citizens within the EU and citizens of former Soviet republics into EU countries. Nonetheless, Brzozowska (2018)'s comparison of on-line discussion groups demonstrates striking parallels between the outlooks of Ukrainians in Poland and Poles in Western Europe. These parallels, which I also found in my own data, point to some universal features of mobility in Europe today, as well as commonalities between European sending countries transitioning away from communist party rule. The article homes in on one Polish city, Płock. There exists a small scholarly literature about new receiving countries, and a smaller literature on regions (Jeram 2013) in transition; this article, by contrast, provides a snapshot of migrant life in a transitioning city.

Poland today is an interesting case study, since, more than any country in Europe, it combines mass out-migration – which, with economic growth, has led to significant unfulfilled labour demand – and a recent influx of international, chiefly Ukrainian migrants. However, this article is primarily not about economic aspects of migrants' lives. It explores some non-economic characteristics of Polish localities which might lead international migrants to cluster there for the first time. It also considers the other side of the coin: specifically Ukrainian characteristics of these migrants, who form judgments of their new home city in Poland on the basis of comparisons between it and specific locations in Ukraine.

The article draws mostly on my 2019 research on interweaving emigration and immigration influences in Płock. However, it also relies on insights from my earlier project on Polish family migration to Western Europe shortly after EU accession. This was a migration which (at least to the UK) was not for initially for settlement, but was mostly open-ended and experimental in character. My book (White 2017) investigated two main questions: why parents started taking their children to live abroad, and how they made decisions about how long to remain. The second question seemed more useful for understanding migrants' lives than the commonly-asked question of how long migrants intend to stay, as used for example by the Office for National Statistics to generate UK official migration data. Migrants often do not have very specific plans, or else change their original plans while abroad.

The 2019 research in Płock confirmed my impression that, even in the 21st century, when migrants are well aware of the numerous mobility opportunities available, many people do rather quickly start to settle in their new place of residence. If they bring over family members, it becomes even harder to uproot themselves again.

The pattern of migration described in Castles and Miller's 'migration process' (Castles and Miller 2009: 33) or Dassetto's 'migration cycle' (Arango 2012: 49), with family reunification succeeding the initial migration by individuals, is considerably speeded up, with the two stages occurring closer together than often happened in the 20th century. However, opportunities to maintain transnational ties even once whole families are settled abroad mean that 'settlement' always remains somewhat provisional.

Studying the migration transition and migrant integration

There seems to exist a 'law of migration' that new EU countries become countries of immigration, as part of their economic convergence with older member-states: a 'catching up' with old members states resulting from increased prosperity. How this migration transition occurs, and affects transitioning societies, can therefore be studied comparatively. Studies include Okólski (ed.) 2012 on Europe; Kenny (2010) and Glynn (2011) on Ireland; Escandell and Ceobanu 2009, Marcu 2007 and Jeram 2013 on Spain; Janská et al. 2014 on Czechia; and Grabowska-Lusińska et al. 2011 (on Poland, Hungary and Czechia). However, Arango (2012: 61) warns against too quickly drawing comparisons between countries making this transition at different historical junctures. He cautions that each generation of new immigration country groupings (north-west, southern and Central-Eastern Europe respectively) possessed a unique combination of features, and that 'it is quite unlikely that latecomers will replicate the experience of the early starters.' In particular, he claims that 'there is little doubt that the historical context in which the "mature" north-western countries grew as immigration receivers and some of the strategic orientations adopted in that context decisively conditioned their further experience with immigration'.

However, my article questions whether this is true. An alternative perspective would be that 21st century dynamic new inflows of highly mobile and transnationally connected migrants to countries across Europe (including the UK) has created a new migration situation everywhere, for migrants and local populations. Moreover, even north-west European countries with developed integration policies have often not applied these to EU mobile citizens, who are not considered to 'need' integration (Collett 2013). Grzymała-Każłowska and Brzozowska (2017: 108) label Ukrainians in Poland 'neither the same nor strangers', but the same could be said of EU citizens living in other EU countries: they share the same EU citizenship; they are not officially 'migrants' in need of 'integration'; yet the receiving population often treats them as strangers.

Among the questions raised in the literature about the migration transition is how comfortable new migrants feel in new receiving countries. On the one hand, familiarity with migration amongst a population more used to emigration than immigration may promote empathy with new arrivals. On the other, this legacy may

not be enough to offset instinctive prejudice against outsiders. Glynn (2011) considers why these different outcomes might occur, and argues that empathy is more noticeable in Ireland, where more parallels have been drawn publicly between Irish migrants and new immigrants, than in Italy.

On the whole it is hard to generalise on the basis of the literature on new receiving countries, partly because it 'takes two to tango'. Not just the receiving country, but also the specific characteristics of the migrant population contribute to different outcomes. For example, it is easier for receiving societies to absorb migrants who know the receiving country language (such as young English-speaking Poles arriving in Ireland around 2004) or can quickly learn it (Romanians in Spain around the same period). Although the wider concept of 'cultural proximity' is potentially problematic, since it can be used in a racist way to create ethnic hierarchies, linguistic proximity, as in the case of Romanian/Spanish or Ukrainian/Polish, has a certain objective reality.

Given that the word 'immigration' carries connotations of permanent settlement, scholars should not rush to label countries with statistical net in-migration as 'countries of immigration'. Arguably, it is only when migrants settle *en masse* that a country can be said to become an immigration country (Grabowska-Lusińska 2011: 9). Since this has not yet happened in Poland, my article avoids the term 'immigration' and uses the term 'new receiving country'. In fact, structural factors make it likely that temporariness will be a long-term attribute of migration to Poland. Because of their location, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) or southern Europe experience extensive transit migration. It is often hard to distinguish between this and immigration, especially since many migrants do not know whether their first destination will be a stepping stone to a neighbouring, more established receiving country, which is more prosperous and where new migrants often possess family and friends. The fact that most migrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) in Poland have no right to permanent residence, and have to periodically renew their visas, obviously limits their ability to settle.

However, temporary status does not necessarily impede feelings of being at home. Ager and Strang (2004) suggest that 'sufficient' integration occurs when a migrant has a basic sense of security and safety (which may be grounded partly in strong social ties with fellow migrants) and can 'confidently engage' in the receiving society in different domains. Looking at integration not as an outcome, but as a process – which can suffer setbacks along the way – it is possible to chart an individual migrant's increasing confidence over time, in various areas of life. Chapter 9 of my monograph (White 2017) applies this approach to a sample of Polish mothers in the UK in 2006–9, and forms the basis for my comparisons with Ukrainian migrants in Poland in this article.

Grzymała-Kazłowska (2016: 1127) believes that the concept of integration, understood as policy towards groups of migrants, 'has not been sufficiently modified to help develop understanding of migrant adaptation in so-called "new" migration, wherein migrants are not settled permanently anywhere, or have close connections

to more than one country.’ She suggests as an alternative metaphor that temporary migrants find ‘anchors’, in the form of institutions, social relations and cultural reference points, which are sufficient to help them feel more secure in their location in the receiving society, though later they may drift on and put down anchors somewhere else. Grzymała-Kazłowska and Brzozowska (2017) argue that, for Ukrainian migrants in Poland, their job is often the main anchor. Brzozowska (2018), comparing material from on-line discussions between Poles in the UK and Ukrainians in Poland, finds that having a secure job and trust in the just working of state institutions was similarly important for both groups – findings which are similar to my own regarding Poles in the UK ten years earlier.

Ukrainians in Poland: the literature

For many years, Polish scholars have been intrigued by how and when Poland would become a ‘country of immigration’ (Igllicka 2001; Grabowska-Lusińska and Okólski 2009; Górny et al. 2010). This state was probably achieved in 2017 or 2018, although the temporary nature of much migration to and from Poland makes it impossible to determine numbers precisely. The new scholarly literature on Ukrainians in Poland includes monographs and edited collections by Andrejuk (2017), Kawczyńska-Butrym et al. (2012), and Kindler (2011), as well as numerous journal articles and working/policy papers. There is also some Polish-Ukrainian collaboration (e.g. Fedyuk and Kindler (eds.) (2016)), as well as a partly separate literature by Ukrainian specialists (e.g. Beichelt and Worschech (eds.) 2017). Research about Ukrainian migrants in a range of countries presents parallels with the Polish case: one example is Kubal’s (2015) study of Ukrainian attitudes towards law enforcement in western Europe.

The literature points to the existence of certain trends. For instance, like Polish migration to the UK, migration from Ukraine to Poland increased rapidly over just a few years, largely thanks to relaxed immigration rules (Górny et al. 2019: 9–11). It is increasingly from all parts of Ukraine; by all social groups; and to many destinations (Brunarska et al. 2016). A 2016 survey found that the typical Ukrainian migrant had secondary vocational education (Górny and Jaźwińska 2019: 18). However, many Ukrainians in Poland have higher education and Ukrainians often work in jobs for which they are over-qualified, particularly when they first arrive. As Andrejuk (2017: 250) points out, ‘above all the narratives underline the diversity of the Ukrainian population in Poland.’

Although the war in eastern Ukraine has been a push factor since 2014, Ukrainians have predominantly come to Poland not to seek asylum, but to work or study, or because they have married Poles. War has led to economic instability and the reduction in opportunities to work in Russia, and migration from central and eastern Ukraine has redirected to Poland. The share of Ukrainian migrants with Polish

heritage – higher in west Ukraine – is therefore decreasing. Ukrainians come for better paid work, not because they are unemployed (Górny and Jaźwińska 2019: 19). Poland is also a transit country for Ukrainians hoping to work further west. Many Ukrainians in Ukraine know people abroad both in Poland and Western Europe/North America.

The literature suggests that many Ukrainians learn to communicate in Polish fairly quickly. This particularly applies to Ukrainian speakers. Since Russian is more distant from Polish, older migrants from Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine, who did not learn Ukrainian at school, are disadvantaged. There exist many barriers to integration in other domains of life, with less well-educated Ukrainians (Janicki 2015) and even students (Długosz 2018) often feeling not fully accepted in Polish society. However, it seems possible for some Ukrainians to feel sufficiently comfortable (given their temporary situation) if they have good networks of fellow Ukrainians (Kindler and Wójcikowska-Baniak 2018). As mentioned above, Grzymała-Kazłowska and Brzozowska (2017) consider work an important stabilising factor, or 'anchor'.

One city's changing migration identity: Płock

Social change in any country can only be understood at sub-national level. This is true of all change, including changing migration patterns; the impact of migration is therefore locally varied. This seems to be true in Poland (White et al. 2018: Chapter 10) and is also very obvious in the UK (Robinson 2010), where it was exemplified in different Brexit referendum results in different localities in 2016. Poland is regionally differentiated, and size of population also often stands out as a differentiating factor (White et al. 2018: Chapter 1). For many social indicators, there are considerable discrepancies between small towns and the large cities, with over 500,000 population.

Płock was chosen as an attractive medium-sized city where one might expect residents to want to stay put, and because it represented two particular types of medium city: it lost the status of regional capital in 1998, and is identified with one wealthy factory (Orlen). With some exceptions – such as Kawczyńska-Butrym et al. (2012) and Kubiciel-Lodzińska and Ruszczak (2016), many studies of Ukrainians focus on Warsaw – for example, Toruńczyk-Ruiz and Brunarska's (2018) study of place attachment. Hence it seemed interesting to look at a smaller place. Górny et al. (2019), comparing Bydgoszcz and Wrocław, argue that Ukrainian migration to each destination city has specific characteristics.

Medium-sized towns are intriguing because they have hallmarks of the big city (e.g., in the case of Płock, a liberal administration) but others of a small town (e.g. they often suffer from labour market problems: unemployment levels in Płock are about one percentage point above the Polish average).² Size is not the only vector,

however: for example, some cities are historic and picturesque where others are grim and post-industrial. It is difficult to generalise about medium-sized cities and one is not going to find some ‘average Poland’ by looking at Płock. However, a city case study provides some clues to phenomena occurring elsewhere.

Moreover, investigating migration at city level prompts reflections on similarities with historical internal migration. Płock became a major population centre in the 1960s and 70s after the creation of the Orlen petrochemical works (Łakomski 2010). However, today the city has limited graduate employment options and out-migration is common, often to Warsaw, just over 100 km distant. Net internal migration was –412 in 2018 (Urząd 2019: 1). According to statistics for permanent residence registrations, the city had net international immigration of 19 people in 2018 (Urząd 2019:1). However, most Ukrainians in the city are not permanent residents. According to the Płock branch of ZUS, the national insurance office, 4658 Ukrainians were registered in the Płock area in December 2018; this includes many people working in agriculture outside the city. My enquiries at the city’s three universities revealed only a handful of Ukrainian students. There is one large concentration of Ukrainians working at a factory in the city (not Orlen) and these formed the bulk of my interviewees.

Methodology

This paper results from a wider project examining interweaving influences of migration from and to Poland in three medium-sized Polish cities. The project investigates how institutions in a Polish city respond to emigration and immigration. It looks at how and why people migrate, and how they decide how long to stay abroad. It also explores the impacts of migration; in particular, the nature of interactions between Poles and Ukrainians and how, if at all, they shape each other’s attitudes and practices. In February 2019 I interviewed key informants, working in different institutions and organisations in Płock, about its labour market, foreign workers, international students and bi-national families. The main research took place in March–April and September 2019. I conducted in-depth interviews with 32 foreigners and 16 Polish return/circular migrants or close relatives and visitors of Poles living abroad.

This article is only about the more recently arrived 25 Ukrainians in my sample, not a Ukrainian who settled in Płock in the 1990s, or the non-Ukrainian interviewees. It is a snapshot of a group of recently-arrived migrants, who experienced life in Poland when it was turning into a country with net immigration. I conducted the interviews in Russian. Some interviewees sprinkled their Russian with Ukrainian words; one spoke Ukrainian throughout.

Their ages ranged from 22–60; the average was about 39. 14 were women; 11, men. Four interviewees came from the west, two from west/central, eleven from

central/south and nine from east Ukraine. Four had Polish relatives and one had a Polish Card (*Karta Polaka*). With the exception of one woman who had visited Polish relatives, no one had been to Poland before 2016. Three interviewees previously worked in Russia. All 25 lived in accommodation provided by their employers, 20 in one hostel which was officially a student hall of residence. 21 worked in the same factory, not connected with Orlen; the other four were employed on the Orlen site, but not by Orlen. Only 4/25 held university degrees (all vocational, and not from prestigious institutions); of these, none had ever been employed using their qualifications. My group of manual workers therefore forms a neat contrast with the entrepreneurs interviewed in Andrejuk's 2017 study: here, only 8/51 were neither university graduates nor current students.

The interviews explored why the participant had chosen to work in Płock compared with other possible livelihood strategies; their transnational and local networks and integration (within the different domains elaborated by Ager and Strang (2008: 170) but avoiding the word integration in favour of the phrase 'feeling at home'); their impressions of Płock and their plans and imaginings about the future. I tried to find out how Ukrainians regarded Polish migration, and how their lives intersected and compared with those of Polish migrants. I also draw on my 115 interviews about migration with working-class Polish mothers in the UK and Poland in 2006–9 (White 2017).

Mobility as the socio-economic and cultural context shaping livelihood strategies in Poland and Ukraine

Interviewees perceived mobility opportunities to underpin their livelihoods. It might seem odd to claim that Polish-Ukrainian transnational space is part of a single European mobility laboratory, since the return part of their 'mobility' is forced by the fact of being in Poland on temporary permits. However, the interviewees tended to emphasise the ease of migration (including visits) in both directions, and often also the experimental quality of that mobility.

They commented on the simplicity of obtaining documents to work in Poland. In one case, this explained why someone came to Poland in particular, not Czechia, where the paperwork took too long. The abundance of informal migration networking, accelerated by communication using social media, facilitated mobility. To quote Mihaylo, from a city in central Ukraine:

The bush telegraph works everywhere. 'Somebody told someone something', and then they tell someone else. They ask 'Where did you go?', 'This place, that one'. Bit by bit, it turned out that everyone was inviting friends and relatives to join them, or bringing over their whole family.

Anna, from west-central Ukraine, who had visited Poland before the recent wave, characterised the situation vividly:

Migration is just crazy nowadays – I came back to Poland [in 2018] and everywhere you heard ‘Galina’, ‘Olena’ – those aren’t Polish names!... People are simply mobile, whether it’s work, or study, off they go to another country, they have so many friends abroad, you wouldn’t believe. In England, in America, relatives in Germany, people across the world.

As I found in the case of Polish families reunifying in the UK after 2004 (White 2017: 107–8), the opportunity to make short inspection visits was common practice, accelerating migration decision-making. In Płock, two interviewees who had joined family members described such visits. Bohdan’s stepfather had worked briefly at the factory to ‘reconnoitre’ before inviting Bohdan. Oksana explained: ‘I hadn’t left my job in Ukraine yet, I just said I would go and have a look, see what it was like.’ After working at the factory for a month, she told her husband she would stay. Since Oksana loved her job in Ukraine as a children’s nurse, this was a difficult decision, which she might not have made without the opportunity for a trial period. A noteworthy aspect of this story is that the Ukrainian employer was ready to support the would-be migrant by granting temporary leave, a widespread experience also for Polish migrants around 2004 (White 2017: 74–5).

Interviewees found it important to be able to get home when they needed to. Particularly at slacker times in the factory, it was relatively easy to obtain leave. Oksana, for example, contrasted her own situation with that of a friend who had worked undocumented in Greece and not seen her son for six years. Explaining why she would probably not try to work in north-west Europe, Zinaida commented ‘I want to be able to go somewhere and work for three months, and then be at home for three months and see my family.’

New bus services linked Płock directly to destinations in Ukraine. As studies by other scholars also show, Ukrainians consider Poland geographically close to Ukraine even if they are not living near the border. This imagined proximity enhances opportunities to pop back and visit children. Olga explained:

My friend has started working in Finland... I was supposed to go with her to Finland, but it’s really far away, so I thought, [it’s not right for] my first time, with the children at home. And when I first worked in Poland, my child did fall ill.

Interviewees, highlighting their mobility, tended to play down the distances travelled. Just as Poles from the eastern borders of Poland who have family in Brussels or London often consider those places ‘closer’ than Warsaw (White et al. 2018: 153), for the Ukrainians geographical distance was subjective. ‘Poland is considered not far from home’, said an interviewee from Mariupol (38 hours by bus and train from Płock). She also commented: ‘I read on the rolling news that lots of Ukrainians are

coming to Poland. They come because at any moment you can return, get on the bus and return. That's why there's a wave of Ukrainians in Poland.'

The sense that everyone was migrating enhanced the feeling that mobility was 'normal' and there was no harm in 'having a try'. For example, as Svitlana (aged 47) recalled, 'Our son was here and he suggested we try working in Poland'. Lubyva (aged 45) 'wanted to try working in Germany' and Zinaida (aged 46) 'wanted to try working in Italy'. Olena (childless and aged 22) became bored with her job in a west Ukrainian city and suggested to her husband 'Let's go abroad and have a try'. My Polish interviewees in 2006–9 frequently talked about 'trying out' migration (using the verb *spróbować*) and in the case of younger interviewees it seemed they were sometimes quick to adopt this option (2017: 75). However, as I also show (White 2017: Chapters 4 and 5) parents in Polish small towns combined discourses about migration being a 'response to opportunity' but also 'forced'. These apparently contradictory elements in the local migration cultures could be reconciled, since there were situations where you would be forced to take an opportunity to migrate. 'We had to try out something new' as Rafał told me in Bristol in 2009. Svitlana's response to her son's invitation to Płock is a case in point.

Like inhabitants of high migration locations in Poland c. 2004, the Ukrainian interviewees were pragmatic about migration. Mobility was a fact of life, particularly in west Ukraine, but also elsewhere. Viktor (35, southern Ukraine) explained that local people went to Germany to pick strawberries and to northern Russia to the oilfields, and then commented 'They're doing the right thing (*vse pravil'no*). People seek out the place where they'll do best.' Klara (25, from east Ukraine) responded to my comment that many Poles worked abroad by saying: 'Yes, we come here, and they go there... It's normal/OK/predictable (*normal'no*). You can earn more there. They're not satisfied here, so they go there. It's better there. And we're not satisfied in Ukraine, so we come here.'

A final similarity with Polish migrants is that, once they are mobile, many Ukrainians seem to find it hard to return long-term. Polish surveys after 2004 tended to show that only a minority of those returning to Poland had definitely decided not to migrate again (White 2014: 75); a recent survey of Ukrainians in Bydgoszcz and Wrocław (Górny et al. 2018: 34) revealed that under 10 % planned to return to Ukraine for good. Only one of my 25 interviewees (with no family members in Poland) was positive that he was about to return permanently.

Rapidly changing migration cultures in the 'mobility laboratory': the aspirations for family reunification

Changes in local migration cultures occur rapidly in the 21st century, thanks to communication technologies. In particular, the direction of migration can change. As already mentioned, after 2014 migration from eastern Ukraine swung from Russia

towards Poland and countries further west. Similarly, after 2004, Germany ceded its place as the top destination for Polish migrants when the UK opened its labour market to new EU member-states. Although the original stimuli for the change in direction are different, in both cases further migration was facilitated by mushrooming migration networks linking origin communities to new destinations.

Another significant change, which contributes to the build-up of a migrant population in the receiving country, is a switch to migration with children. One might suppose that family reunification occurs mostly in response to conditions in the receiving country, and, according to proponents of a migration ‘process’ or ‘cycle’, it typically takes place some time after the initial flow of migrants unaccompanied by children. However, Polish families began arriving in the UK and Ireland in tens of thousands within a few years of 2004, and this was partly in response to changes in migration cultures in Poland. In Polish locations with high volumes of migration many parents migrated alone in the 1990s; particularly when they were undocumented, they could be away for years, especially in the USA. After 2004, friends and family members rapidly persuaded one another that it was feasible and indeed preferable, for emotional reasons, to migrate with spouses and children, rather than leaving the household in Poland. My survey in Podkarpacie in 2008 showed widespread belief that this was the best option, and in interviews mothers repeatedly made assertions that families should be together (White 2017: Chapters 6–7).

In Ukraine it is common for children to be left with mothers or grandparents while one or both parents work abroad (Fedyuk 2016: 80–83). Płock interviewees made comments such as ‘Of course, they leave the children with their granny, an aunt or a sister’ (Daria, central Ukrainian city) as if this were common knowledge. On the other hand, Yevhen (south Ukraine) made the comment ‘The main thing is for the family to be together’. Anna, from western Ukraine, spoke as if it were normal to prefer to bring children from Ukraine.

At the factory, we have people who have brought over their children to attend technical college... They want the children to be with them, not a grandmother, you understand that adult or teenage children, if they’re left with granny and granddad, it doesn’t work out well... Here, they have the chance for personal development, so that’s why they migrate.

Since only one of the interviewees had permanent resident’s rights in Poland, thanks to a Polish Card, bringing non-adult children to join them was not an immediate option for most interviewees. On the other hand, adult children were joining their parents.

As indicated in Table 1, most interviewees had either tried or were hoping for family members to join them, in some cases taking concrete action like visiting local schools. Others had heard on the hostel rumour mill that Ukrainian children were being educated in Płock, and this led them to consider the option.

Table 1

Family reunification of interviewees (N = 25)

Reunification category	Number of interviewees	Notes
Whole nuclear family living in Płock hostel	2	1 childless couple, 1 couple with Polish Card and two children who had just completed the final years of secondary education in Płock (boarding in school accommodation) and now worked in factory.
Tried to reunify but it did not work	2	1 man with daughter who had tried but failed to enter university in Poland (after taking Polish classes at school in Ukraine). 1 man whose wife had joined him (working professionally in Płock) but earned so little he decided she should return.
Want to bring over children and/or spouses	13	1 interviewee already had one of her sons (as well as other family members) in Płock,
Ukraine-based partner might want to come	1	The interviewee mentioned his wife talked of working abroad from time to time.
Not intending to invite (but has dependents)	1	A long-term solo migrant (previously worked in Russia) who apparently preferred to migrate alone.
Childless or with children in mid-/late 20s in Ukraine	6	Two of these interviewees had recently become a couple.
Total	25	

Source: own data

Motivations for migrating and settling in Poland

Not surprisingly, interviewees were quick to make comments like 'we came here to work'. The main migration motive was almost always financial: usually low wages rather than unemployment. In a few cases, a business had failed. However, such statements have to be understood in the context of their place in the interview. Assertions like 'I'm here to earn money' were often made during a discussion about unpleasant working conditions in the factory. When the conversation turned to how they spent free time in Płock, and differences which struck them between Płock and their home towns in Ukraine, a complex array of motivations to remain in Poland (and specifically Płock) was revealed. Even if someone can be classed as a labour migrant because of their initial motivation, this does not exclude other motives appearing over time.

Many authors (e.g. Eade et al. 2007, Krings et al. 2013) have noted how Poles experimenting with migration to the UK and Ireland after 2004 treated the experience as an adventure and opportunity for self-development. Although these aspirations are often ascribed to young graduates in particular, even older, less well-educated migrants shared them to some extent (White 2010). Andrejuk (2017: 222) also mentions the significance, for young Ukrainians, of ‘curiosity about the world, possibilities for self-realisation and having adventures’. Some Płock interviewees expressed similar views. 36-year old Pavlo, for example, said ‘It’s all eye-opening. This is the first time I’ve been out of Ukraine... For me it’s very important experience, and everything I see is interesting.’ 48-year old Ludmila asserted ‘I want to learn to drive. Because in Ukraine not many women can drive. I want to learn new skills, not just to work, to earn money.’ Ludmila’s case paralleled that of 31-year old Dominika, whom I interviewed in the UK in 2009. Like Ludmila, Dominika talked with enthusiasm about learning to drive in a part of interview when she was describing why she felt at home (*u siebie*) in the UK.

Polish families in the UK shortly after 2004 often mentioned to me that they valued a feeling of stability and security, and Poles I interviewed in Poland also mentioned this as an advantage of living abroad. Interviewees persistently complained that the Polish state did not help families: they migrated because ‘it’s hard for families to live in Poland’ (White 2017: 57). However, Polish interviewees referred almost exclusively to economic security. Since the outbreak of war, Ukrainian migrants have special security concerns. Andrejuk (2017: 223–6) observes that feelings of insecurity generated by war prompted some of her interviewees to migrate as whole families. More generally, Andrejuk (2017: 220–22, 273) shows how her sample felt more ‘comfortable’ in Poland because of more trust, less corruption and other crime, and more efficiently functioning and transparent bureaucracy. Three Płock interviewees (from east Ukraine) talked about the conflict, but, more commonly, they complained about economic insecurity generated by the war, particularly inflation. Another specific component of Ukrainian insecurity was worries about corruption: whether they could afford to pay bribes for their children to get good exam results, or secure jobs after graduation. (By contrast, Polish interviewees, especially from small towns, were more likely to complain about nepotism and cronyism as barriers to mobility.)

Despite these differences, it is striking – as also observed by Brzozowska (2018) – that Polish and Ukrainian migrants notice similar advantages of life abroad. For example, Polish migrants who had worked in Ireland complained that in Poland people did not smile at strangers, whereas Irish people did, while Ukrainians complained that Ukrainians did not smile, but Polish people do. The apparent contradiction can be partly explained by a time lag. For example, Poles could appreciate more computerised official processes, better child benefit and more careful driving in the UK than in Poland in 2009, but by 2019 these aspects of life had improved in Poland too. However, this ‘catching up’ is not true in all aspects of life: in particular, it is clearly not the case that Poland has ‘caught up’ with north-west Europe in the important

respect of wages, as Ukrainian migrants were quick to point out. In fact, a new receiving country almost by definition is poorer than a mature receiving country: it has newly acquired receiving status largely because it has only just reached a level of economic development sufficient to attract net migration.

Another way of viewing social change in Poland and Ukraine is that both countries are extricating themselves from the legacies of communist party rule and the chaos of the early transition period, but that Poland has moved further along the trajectory in areas of life which migrants notice. Interviewees complained that in Ukraine they witnessed careless driving, poor roads, grumpy service in shops, *nouveaux riches* flaunting expensive cars and clothes, towns with many areas fenced off and insufficient public space, and widespread corruption. Of course it is problematic to assume a linear model of development, and there is a danger of 'orientalising' and assuming that all places east of where one happens to be located are civilisationally 'behind' and/or glamourising 'Europeanisation'. However, migrants often seem to view things this way. The belief that going West equals going 'ahead' stimulates and retrospectively justifies the original migration act. It also induces settlement. It is not surprising if migrants make positive comments about things they notice in everyday life. The subjectivity of such judgements is illustrated by the fact that (if anywhere east is regarded as inferior) the points of comparison do not have to be 'Ukraine – Poland – UK'. In other contexts, the contrast might equally well be between Russia and Poland, or between eastern and western parts of Poland.

Bohdan commented, for example: 'I didn't like the attitude of people [in Moscow] to migrant workers. Here in Poland it's more or less OK; if you work, you have protective gloves, definitely a visor, but there, nobody bothered.' Artem reproduced stereotypes about within-Poland divides:

Where I worked in the furniture factory in N. [near Gdańsk] it was closer to Germany, and the Poles were completely different [from in Płock]. For example, after a Pole smoked, he would never throw his empty cigarette packet on the ground... In N., by every shop, every 50 metres, there was a litter bin. And in Płock you can look for one and never find it.

The subjectivity of such judgements is well-illustrated in this example. It was not my observation that Płock had a litter problem, and other interviewees described it as neat and tidy. (For example, Pavlo said, 'It's clean and orderly, everything is in its proper place. Back home (*u nas*) people don't care, they just drop litter anywhere.')

Although westward mobility was presented positively on the whole, 'civilisation' also has downsides, which can stop migrants feeling at home. Alternatively, perhaps, when they are feeling down, they tend to notice negative features more. For some interviewees, food was a special problem. Just as, among Poles, 'English cuisine [was] regarded as unhealthy and over-processed' (Rabikowska and Burrell 2009: 220), Ukrainian informants complained about packaged and processed food: 'peaches like

cotton wool' (Olena) or '*smalec*³ like soap' (Nikolai). Several pointed out that where they lived in Ukraine it was easier to buy homegrown food.

However, not all interviewees subscribed to a 'Ukraine = more backward/natural' analysis. Just as Polish interviewees after 2004 sometimes pointed to Poland's difficult political and economic situation at that period, some Ukrainians emphasised that conditions in Ukrainian society had deteriorated since war began in 2014 – people were irritable and stressed (Mihaylo) and had no money or energy to paint their houses or care for their surroundings (Daria). Others pointed out that Ukraine had not always been the poor relation (cf. similar views reported in Andrejuk 2017: 228, 268). For example, Oksana (aged 41, from west Ukraine) remarked that 'in the 1990s Poles were poorer than us. They came to us for work. And after 25 years they live much much better than Ukrainians.'

The subjectivity of migrants' observations is also highlighted by the fact that, as in the UK (White 2017: Chapters 8–9), spouses could voice opposite opinions about the same phenomena. Natalia, who lived with her husband, commented, for example, 'Since my husband is in the West, he likes everything. Everything is as delicious as could possibly be, and God forbid I should criticise anything!'

Specific qualities of Płock as a destination

For most of the Ukrainian interviewees, Płock was a chance destination; they did not come to Poland to come to Płock. A friend or family member happened to invite them, or they were offered a job by an agency. One person had Polish relatives who had now died. However, security is perceived as being high in Płock, so it provides some important 'anchors' which encourage – at least temporarily – a feeling of being at home. 'Peaceful/quiet' (*spokoinyi*) was the adjective most commonly applied. The slow pace of life allowed residents to spend time chatting in queues and shops, and pedestrians would wait for a green light to cross even when there was no traffic. The migrants' favourite outdoor activity appeared to be walking in the park on the Vistula embankment. Comments were made about the tidy appearance of the city, echoing the appreciation of some of Andrejuk's interviewees for well looked-after public space in Poland (Andrejuk 2017: 274–5). The Ukrainians' impressions generally concurred with those of the 22 non-Ukrainian residents whom I interviewed for my project, as well as my own observations.

However, many Polish residents display anxiety regarding Orlen, the petrochemical works which dominates the city's economy. Poles would draw my attention to smoke rising from the plant and voice their suspicions that, even if pollution was better concealed than in the communist period, it still represented a health hazard.

³ In Russian, *salo* – lard (eaten with bread).

The Ukrainian interviewees never mentioned this danger, and in cases where I raised the matter they either commented that it was good that in Poland there were still functioning factories, or asserted that pollution was worse back home. (For similarly over-optimistic Polish impressions of crime levels in UK cities see White 2017: 86.)

Just a few interviewees mentioned that they had heard about hate directed against Ukrainians in Poland. However, they all felt this must be happening somewhere else, not in Płock. They routinely described Polish residents of Płock as friendly/welcoming (*privetlivye*). Ludmila said 'I have never heard Poles complaining about us, saying "they've come over here taking our jobs"'. Several mentioned that their Polish co-workers tried to understand and/or could understand Ukrainian. 'They already understand us well, because they're hearing Ukrainian all the time... We understand each other with no language barrier' (Svitlana). 'They listen and learn our language. If we gather on the street, we're having a chat outside, we start laughing and telling stories, they ask us to repeat what we said, they're drawn into the conversation... We get on well. There's no sense that "I'm a Pole and you're a Ukrainian"' (Larisa).

One Russian speaker (who did not live in the hostel) complained about anti-Russian attitudes; like some of Andrejuk's (2017: 266) Russian-speaking Ukrainian participants, he found himself identified as Russian. However, other interviewees had the impression that local people liked practising their Russian. Larisa commented: 'In Płock they're already used to Ukrainians, there are plenty of them, and sometimes especially older people who learned Russian, well it happens they'll come up... and start chatting, they're being friendly, it's nice. Of course there are other people who keep their distance.' A couple of interviewees mentioned that if they were in the bank or the travel agency they would look out for older employees, or a younger person would fetch an older colleague so they could communicate in Russian.

Most interviewees reported having conversations about migration with Poles. One function of such conversations was information-gathering about opportunities to work in countries further west: an aspiration which many interviewees entertained, though often as an apparently vague intention, for some time in the future. It seemed particularly important to male interviewees who felt they were not earning enough in Płock and, as a hope for the future, constituted an 'anchor' helping them accept the present.

The sense that Poles understood what migration was about did seem to promote a kind of solidarity between Poles and Ukrainians. The concept of 'empathy' (about which I never asked directly) was used only once – as it happened, about an incident in Warsaw.

This Polish woman said to us "I know what it's like to work abroad and I really feel for you (*sochuvstvuyu*), leaving your family. Because I tried going to Germany too" – it was hard for her (Daria).

Empathy could also be less explicit. For example, Valerii mentioned, ‘Today at work I was talking with a Pole who told me how “nowadays Poland has become a bit better but in the 90s we had hard times too”’.

Integration in the micro-world of the factory and hostel

The interviewees were doing heavy physical work, sometimes for long hours, and had little time or energy to socialise outside their workplace and the hostel. Moreover, no activities were organised for them in the city. Płock’s Orthodox priest informed me that the small Orthodox chapel was attended mostly by Russians and Belarusians who happened to reside permanently in the city. While I was in Płock, Greek Catholic services were being advertised on the internet; however, when I visited this church the Roman Catholic priest told me that services had been abandoned because so few Ukrainians attended.

Integration into wider life of the city was inhibited by the fact that interviewees were not confident Polish speakers; most, for example, felt they would not understand a film in Polish. Although some professed to prefer Poland as a destination because Polish was ‘close’ to Ukrainian, it often seemed they meant Polish was just less difficult than English or German would have been.

The factory workers did however have friends (in a few cases, close friends who invited them home) among Polish work colleagues. All described socialising with Polish workmates. On the other hand, some interviewees mentioned that Polish workers were as temporary as themselves; some just worked in the factory between spells abroad. Polish colleagues also fixed them up with additional work. Daria explained:

At work they know us – Poles are good people. They’re constantly helping us, and if someone needs a job doing, they contact us. They say ‘We have Ukrainians’, they contact us to go and clear up someone’s country cottage, mow the lawn, whatever. ‘We know people who can do it at the weekend.’

The interviewees who lived in the hostel (also home to some of their Polish co-workers) mostly seemed to regard it as an ‘anchor’. Two female interviewees had previously stopped working at the factory because they did not like the heavy labour, but eventually returned because the accommodation was superior to other housing they experienced at jobs elsewhere in Poland. Others invited their friends and family to join them specifically because of the living conditions, not the factory to which the accommodation was tied. The Ukrainians appreciated the fact that there were rooms for just two occupants, which family members could share, and that the hostel was a clean and peaceful place to return after work. A handwritten notice on the front door, in Russian, states ‘No entry to drunk people’; one interviewee, Yevhen, explained

that he liked particularly the fact that the warden strictly enforced the non-drinking rule. By contrast, another interviewee who did not live in the hostel complained about heavy drinking by his Ukrainian housemates.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the experiences of migrants in a new receiving country, Poland. Poland is one of the third generation of European new receiving countries identified by Arango (2012). In some ways, Płock's identity as a new receiving location did shape the experiences of Ukrainians in my sample, notably in that the local authorities were not involved in supporting them; however, the same is often true for EU migrants in 'old' receiving countries like the UK. Also connected to Poland's 'new' status was the perception of some migrants that it was an inferior destination, a stepping stone to work in old immigration countries of north-west Europe.

However, much more important was Poland's status as a country which had moved further away than Ukraine from the troubled period of post-communist transition. Like Poles in the UK immediately after EU accession, interviewees appreciated not having to deal with 'post-communist' features of their society. The interviewees were impressed by their encounters with Polish officialdom, and the quality of roads and other infrastructure; above all, they found it relaxing to live in a society where they did not have to think about paying bribes. It was such considerations, as well as the impression they had gained that Płock was secure and peaceful, with friendly inhabitants, which prompted many to consider relocating their wives and/or children to Poland.

Although they seemed to live restricted lives, integrated thoroughly only into the micro-world of factory and hostel, they did feel at home in this world, partly because their co-workers had made an effort to learn some Ukrainian. The hostel and factory friendships seemed to constitute their main 'anchors' in Płock, together with (for many) their dreams of family reunification in Poland.

However, most important of all for the interviewees was their perception that they lived in a world full of mobility opportunities. They possessed sizeable and constantly expanding and developing transnational networks. The Ukrainians often asserted that they could 'easily' travel between Poland and Ukraine and maintain their transnational family ties – even if their mobility, without residence rights, would seem severely limited. Their legal status is completely different from that of Poles in other EU countries and their dreams of bringing their children to Poland seem likely to remain unfulfilled. Nonetheless, for the Ukrainian interviewees, Poland represented part of a European mobility space which encompassed Ukraine as well as the countries of the European Union.

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