



# ***Intersectionality of Symbolic Violence against Highly-Qualified Female Migrants in Poland***

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## **Abstract**

The article describes the manifestations of non-physical hurt experienced by highly skilled female migrants from Belarus and Ukraine. Referring to intersectional approach, I show how three social categories: nationality, age and gender affect their everyday experience of living and working in the corporate sector in Poland with Polish colleagues. Using examples from in-depth interviews with migrants I analyse the occurrences of symbolic violence such as staring, ignoring, social rejection, double standards, being asked infuriating questions, hearing insulting tirades, conditional forms of acceptance, discourses of suspicion, pointing out foreign accent. Being young female foreign specialists but coming from the former USSR republics they go against the normative expectations of the host society representatives and distort the symbolic power structures, which results in them experiencing various forms and degrees of symbolic oppression. The paradox of their situation is that on the macro level, these migrants were encouraged to come to Poland and could benefit from certain institutional facilitations, but on the micro level these women experienced unequal treatment through interaction with the members of the host society.

## **Keywords:**

symbolic violence, nationality, age and gender, highly qualified female migrants, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poland as a host country.

The aim of this article is to describe the manifestations of symbolic violence towards migrants referring to intersectional approach. In particular, I will put under scrutiny the experiences of highly skilled females from former USSR republics (Belarus and Ukraine) to Poland.

By symbolic violence I mean the non-physical hurt experienced by female migrants due to their position in the host-society. I also draw upon the legacy of intersectionality – as it proves relevant for the study of migrant identities & experiences – which was originally explored by the Black feminist movements in the times of struggle for civil rights of African Americans in the 1970s, and gained momentum in women's studies towards the end of the 20th century (Garneau, 2018). I will elaborate on these concepts in more detail the theoretical section of this article.

I will begin by outlining the specificity of the migrant group and the host society which is the interest of my research and the theoretical inspirations for the analysis carried out, then I will present the methodological assumptions of my study. Next, I will focus on how the categories of gender, age and nationality interplay and resonate in the experiences of chosen female migrants working in the corporate sector in Poland supporting the findings with quotes from the interviews, which will be summed up in the final conclusions.

## The research context

I analyse the experiences of highly skilled female migrants from post-USSR republics bordering the European Union from the perspective of the post-socialist semi-peripheral countries in the new Eastern Europe, which began to form with the fall of the old regimes in the last decade of the 20th century. Such an analysis is particularly interesting in the context of Poland due to its specificity as a host country, which is a post-socialist country itself

but at the same time an EU member-state (and, for a long time, a major 'exporter' of labour migrants to EU markets). Referring to Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of The Modern World-System (1974–1989) Poland's role is clearly semi-peripheral being, on the one hand, the periphery to the core capitalist West providing it with commodities (in this case cheaper but good quality labour), at the same time being the core for the peripheral Ukraine or Belarus.

I focus on females from Ukraine and Belarus since, as far as non-EU citizens are concerned, they constitute the most numerous groups of migrants/foreigners in Poland, a significant proportion of whom are women. According to the information provided by the Office for Foreigners<sup>1</sup> on foreigners with valid residence permits, the two largest non-EU groups, as of 2016 were Ukrainians (84 000) and Belarusians (11 000). The largest (almost threefold) increase between 2013 and 2016 concerns Ukrainian citizens, who make up 36 per cent of all registered foreigners. If we check the latest statistics for 2019, the trend is the same (Ukrainians – 7176, Belarusians – 4950). What is more, since 2010, Poland has become the most popular EU migration destination especially for Ukrainians and it is the only EU member where, since 2014, one can observe a dynamic increase in the number of Ukrainians (OSW, 2017, p. 43).

Since the 1990s when the borders opened and Poland became a popular destination for migration, especially from Ukraine, for the first two decades the stereotype of manual workers from the East has become quite fixed – in the case of men, they were expected to work in agriculture, as construction workers or

labourers, and in the case of women, they were strongly associated with care work, domestic work or the service sector. In the past, Ukrainian women were also stereotyped as sex-workers (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2007, pp. 216–218, 223). However, when compared with other popular destination countries such as Italy, Spain or Portugal, where they are mainly middle-aged women providing care for the elderly, their occupational profiles are in fact more diverse (OSW, 2017, p. 40).

Until 2003 it was also easy to come as Poland was outside the Schengen area and a tourist visa would suffice to enter the country and take up employment in the grey-area of the economy. This was a common strategy of coping with the difficult economic and social situation caused by the collapse of the USSR and economic crises (more: Dolińska, 2019a). The influx of citizens of the former USSR republics was rapid and steady, and in those first decades, Poles had trouble distinguishing the various nationalities and would collectively call them "Ruski", a slightly pejorative word meaning someone from the USSR.

After Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, taking into account demographic factors such as the ageing population and the outflow of workers to the open western labour markets, the Polish authorities started implementing a number of measures to encourage migration of workers from the East<sup>2</sup>, also underlining the

argument of 'cultural proximity', which was to mitigate the potential cultural clash following the inflow of foreign workers to a mono-ethnic country. The estimates of the Polish National Bank (Chmielewska, Dobroczycki, Panuciak, 2018) show that in 2017 there were about one million foreign workers in Poland, 87% of whom were Ukrainian (which constitutes 6.3% of all the people aged 15–64 active professionally).

Still, negative attitudes towards Eastern neighbours prevail. Since 1993 The Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) has been researching the attitudes of Poles towards other nationalities. The author of the report, Małgorzata Omyła-Rudzka explains that this image consists of many aspects, such as (...) *national stereotypes, historical conditions, personal experiences, current events and political relations between the countries (...) Poles like nations living in countries with a higher standard of living (measured, for example, by such indicators of human development as the Human Development Index), which constitute a positive reference group for us, which we are aspiring to, and like less those with a lower standard of living* (CBOS, 2019, p. 7). Comparing the data from the last 25 years, the researchers

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citizenship free of charge, but above all, it ensures open and equal access to the labour market. Another solution was a simplified system of employing foreigners, the so-called *declaration system* (*system oświadczeniowy*) which discharges foreigners from the obligation to have a work permit for a period not exceeding 6 months (Górny, Kaczmarczyk, Szulecka, Bitner, Okólski, Siedlecka, Stefańczyk, 2018; OSW, 2017). There are also various scholarship university programmes and incentives for students which have resulted in a nearly six-fold increase in the number of foreign students in Poland over the decade 2006–2016 who currently amount to 57,119 people, of which 53.5% are Ukrainians (including 55% women). The second-largest group are Belarusians, who constitute 8 per cent of the total number (of which 59.5 per cent are women) (Central Statistical Office, 2016, p. 448).

<sup>1</sup> Over 234000 foreigners with valid residence permits in Poland. Downloaded from: <https://udsc.gov.pl/ponad-234-tys-cudzoziemcow-z-prawem-pobytu-w-polsce/>

<sup>2</sup> One such measure is the Act on Karta Polaka of 2007 (translated as Pole's Card, Polish Charter or Polish Card). This document entered into force in March 2008 and originally could have been granted to a person from a former USSR republic, and since 2019 it can be granted to any individual, including a stateless person, who submits a written declaration of belonging to the Polish nation and meets other conditions specified in the Act. Having the Card is not tantamount to obtaining Polish citizenship, but it puts the holder in a privileged position, for example by enabling them to obtain a national visa entitling to multiple crossings of the Polish border and to apply for permanent residence/

note a generally positive trend of improving attitude towards the neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, although the largest migrant groups in Poland come from neighbouring countries, and their presence in the public space of big cities and smaller towns has already become something common, in the study of Poles' attitudes towards other nationalities, Ukrainians, Belarusians (and Russians) have been the least liked group for over 20 years.

Therefore, it is valid to undertake the analysis of the manifestations of symbolic violence and to study of the discrepancies between the official endeavours of the authorities, universities and employers, and the everyday practice – the attitudes and behaviour of the representatives of the host society experienced by migrants in everyday interactions.

### Theoretical inspirations & methodological assumptions

The migrants who are of my research interest are on the margins of statistical surveys and qualitative studies. From the receiving country's perspective, the highly-skilled specialists, white-collar corporate workers are the desired foreigners, who benefit the local labour market according to pre-defined and country-specific economic criteria. As such, they are not perceived as problematic and, hence, are socially invisible.

It is perhaps worth noting who I consider to be a highly-skilled migrant. In my research and for the purpose of this article she is a woman with post-secondary education holding an academic degree, who also possesses extensive professional experience, allowing her to take up employment on the primary labour market upon arrival in the host country in a job relevant to her qualifications, in sectors that are not commonly associated with the 'migrant niche' (e.g. care work, domestic service or the

service sector), nor is she a spouse of a Polish national (more: Dolińska, 2019b).

Another reason why my attention is directed to successful females from Ukraine and Belarus is that for many people they will intuitively go against the normative expectations of an expat, who is more likely assumed to be a man from Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, being young women from Ukraine and Belarus, successful in the international corporate sector even if not (yet) on a managerial position, they challenge the stereotypes of a few overlapping social categories (nationality, age, gender), which result in them experiencing various forms and degrees of symbolic oppression.

I have occasionally been challenged why I concentrate exclusively on female migrants, being told that the gender category applies to men too, who can also experience different forms of stigmatisation. That being true, I will agree with the researchers (Iredale, 2005; Kofman, 2000; Kofman and Raghuram, 2005) who stress that studies of highly skilled migration tend to focus on jobs and sectors which have been heavily male-dominated (such as finance, science and technology) as there is a strong economic bias towards the notion of skills.

*(...) The presence of migrant women is not analytically linked to the world of production or to skills but connected with social, welfare and integration. Thus they are omitted from the discussion of women as economic actors of migration* (Kofman, 2012, p. 73)

Moreover, the repertoire of potential gender constraints to one's career whether it means pay gap, promotion opportunities or harassment, (neo)conservative expectations will

<sup>3</sup> In a 2012 study of 'Expatriate managers in international companies in Poland' recalled by Izabela Bień (2019), 84% of the 111 interviewees were men, 78% were 30–49 years old, and 71% came from Western Europe, especially from Great Britain, France, Spain and Holland.

rotate along completely different axes for women and for men.<sup>4</sup>

As I wrote at the very beginning of this article, I aim at exploring symbolic violence with the analytical tool of the intersectional approach. Kimberlé Crenshaw, considered to be the founding mother of the intersectional theory which she laid out in an article published in 1989, pointed out that in order to understand the complexity of social reality, a multidimensional analysis considering the simultaneous interplay of multiple categories of social differentiation (e.g. race, gender) is necessary. This approach has ever since gained ground and has been applied in social sciences for research and analysis in a variety of fields focusing on social and political identity, discrimination/privilege. As such, the intersectional approach is relevant for the study of migrant identities & experiences, and is pertinent for analysing the (symbolic violence) experiences of highly qualified women from the East in Poland, as it takes into account the disparate social categories – nationality, age, gender – which in fact overlap and intertwine to propose an explanation of their complex situation at both micro (subjective experiences, interactions) and macro level (historical legacy, inequality, public discourse).

The concept of symbolic violence, introduced to sociology by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s was originally used with reference to the reproduction and subliminal reinforcement of the status of a group in the social hierarchy through body language and aesthetic symbols (Bourdieu, 2005). As a framework, it has since been developed and applied in the study of various forms of non-physical

<sup>4</sup> To give an example: Margaret Walton-Roberts (2019, p. 23) writes about the competitive advantage of male nurses from India, who despite entering a heavily feminised profession enjoy greater benefits.

oppression, such as e.g. gender power relations or language. Feminist research (...) *redefined symbolic violence to stand for denying the presence, skills or contributions of the other, calling attention to real and symbolic status downgrading.* (Flam and Beauzamy, 2008, pp. 221–222). As the authors observe, in both Bourdieu's and feminist concepts, the victims are perceived as *unaware* of the violent practices and what follows remain *'unhurt'*. However, in the context of migrants, the spectrum of the acts of symbolic violence committed by the host society in order to sustain its superior position in the social hierarchy is not only wide, but also tangible. Helena Flam and Brigitte Beauzamy (2008) point to such practices as staring, ignoring (averted gaze), glaring, banal nationalism, bodily rejection, being asked infuriating questions, name-calling, insulting tirades, scapegoating discourses, being unseen (the case of illegal workers), conditional forms of acceptance or institutional scrutiny. Some of these result from the fact that racism in Europe still (...) *takes a form of (white) ethnic nationalism* in opposition to the idea of belonging based on citizenship. However, this is not a crucial factor in the case of my interviewees, as in Poland they are racially invisible. On the other hand, foreign accents or names revealing one's origin will play a significant role in distinguishing them from the natives. Although not all of the above factors will apply to my interviewees – highly skilled migrants – there will be other dimensions of experiencing symbolic violence perpetrated by the local society, such as age, gender and nationality, discourses of suspicion or double standards. Being foreign specialists but coming from the former USSR republics, being young women, successful on the primary labour market, they go against the normative expectations of the host society representatives and distort the symbolic power structures.

## Methodological assumptions

The analytical part of this article is based on 2 interviews selected from a pool of 39 in-depth, unstructured interviews with biographical elements, which I had conducted in 2015/2016 with women who at the time of the interview had been living in Poland for at least one year in Warsaw, Kraków, Gdańsk and Szczecin. They were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, transcribed and anonymised. The language of the interview was mostly Polish, in a few cases of women who had been in Poland for the shortest time – it was English.

As my objective is to describe the manifestations of symbolic violence towards migrants, being interested in the everyday interactionist experiences of the interviewees, the way these are presented and commented in their spontaneous story, and not to conduct quantitative estimates of the phenomenon, I focus on 2 narrations, which are rich in empirical content. This is not to say that such threads do not appear in the other interviews, but referring to more examples would not support my claims in any substantial way.

One of the chosen interviews is with Yuliya<sup>5</sup>, at the time of the interview a 29-year-old Ukrainian specialist working in finances, living in Poland for one year (the language of the interview was English), and the other one is with Alena, at the time of the interview a 34-year-old Belarusian project coordinator in an advertising agency, who had been living in Poland for 11 years (the interview was conducted in Polish). At the time of the interview they were both single and childless, and they both came to Poland outside of migration networks – Yuliya relocated within the same corporation, and Alena initially applied for a PhD programme, but resigned within a year and took up employment in the private sector.

<sup>5</sup> The names have been changed.

I will use examples from these narrative interviews to illustrate different aspects of symbolic violence referring to the categories laid out in the previous section.

## Manifestations of symbolic violence in the corporate workplace – the case of Yuliya

First, I would like to focus on Yuliya (29) who relocated within the same international corporation, one of the largest and renowned accounting organisations worldwide, from the Kyiv branch to the Polish office (along with three other colleagues – one woman and two men). In her case migration was part of the whole family's long term plan, which dictated her choice of studies and learning foreign languages from an early age. Having the go-getter personality, she had been investing in her future migration for years, fostering contacts, jumping at every opportunity to take part in international projects. From her story we can gather that she's a member of the aspiring middle class – European-oriented, well educated, hard-working, speaking foreign languages, active, mobile, independent, displaying a high level of agency. Her choice of Poland as the country of migration was accidental, she simply seized the opportunity which arose, and the geographical and seemingly cultural/linguistic proximity were an additional asset. However, she had a hard landing in Poland, where her „me”, which was expecting a promotion to cosmopolitan upper circles and the expat community, was confronted with a glass wall of the receiving society.

## Age/Double standards

In the Ukrainian education system, people enter university at the age of 17, consequently, they graduate younger and can pursue their careers earlier. Also, the western culture

pattern of prolonging youth until one's 30s, enjoying life, travelling is not available to most students in Ukraine or Belarus. Thus, they will potentially climb the career ladder faster than their western colleagues. However, there seems to be a gender bias towards one's achievements at a relatively young age. Yuliya observes that her Ukrainian male colleagues do not experience the same problems as she and Natalia, the other Ukrainian woman who relocated within the same corporation.

*(...) guys don't have any problems like we do (...) they don't. They are treated like, they have even one advantage because they are younger than average level of seniors here. We are younger when we start university so we are like moving through the career faster, I also don't feel very comfortable because other seniors are older than me, but for girl, it's like 'Why that happened? Who let that happen?' For a guy, it's 'Wow, how did you do that?'*

Yuliya is not only confronted with the discourse of suspicion from the Polish colleagues for being too young to perform her job well but also from a client, who in fact insults her by undermining her skills:

*(...) I had one guy who asked me for passport, because he said: 'I'm not sure you are allowed to work already'.*

For the client, the proof of Yuliya's high qualifications by the prestige of the company she works for gets cancelled by her age, background and gender. Being a migrant in Poland, she also encounters acts of oppression from non-Poles, and is confronted with sexualized stereotypes, when age, gender, nationality and (attractive) appearance lead to humiliating interactions. Once, travelling by bus to Warsaw from Lviv she recalls a conversation with a seasonal male Ukrainian worker:

*(...) the guy sitting next to me he was quite kind and he had some kind of pity for me, he was saying: "my god, you are so young and you already doing all the stuff" and I was like: "which sad stuff?" (laughs) ok, he did not develop this discussion, he probably treated me as I don't know, I believe as a prostitute and he did not develop this discussion not to embarrass me more*

Another awkward play-on-words happened at the airport in Moscow, when she was flying back to Warsaw from business negotiations with a client.

*(...) I was in Moscow for 4 months just with one project, and every time I was crossing the border the custody workers of Russia were asking: "What is the purpose of your visit?" And I was saying: "business negotiations". And they were always blinking one eye. Like, "ok ok, I know your 'negotiations.'" And what can I do? I cannot argue with a guy in the custody, so it's quite a common attitude.*

She says that the same happens during meetings with clients in Arabic countries:

*They treat me seriously. I'm in a suit, I was looking as a business style, from the moment I say I'm from Ukraine they'll also start smiling, they change their behaviour.*

One could easily try to downplay the seriousness of such occurrences, 'blaming' them e.g. the individuals' lack of manners or on patriarchal culture, yet the repetitiveness of such comments, omnipresence and suspicious attitudes undermining one's legitimacy to perform work tasks requiring in fact a high level of expertise must definitely make it twice harder for her to maintain professional approach and composure. She deals with this by adopting the attitude of calm resignation

It happens, maybe we deserved it, this attitude somehow (laughs) and makes further migration plans.

### Social rejection

Yuliya also complains about the social interactions with colleagues at work. Her expectations of landing in an expat community were confronted with hostility and closed doors:

(...) with time passing by what I faced here in this office is that people are quite closed. I think it's some kind of Polish general behaviour and when I'm trying to find some contacts and to spend time, because I was absolutely alone, like all my evenings were free for anything, and people were looking at me like I'm asking for money. I don't know, like the best way if they will refuse in polite manner the worst case if they are refusing not in polite manner like why do you think I should do it? Or, why do you expect me to go out somewhere if I have my own friends? Or something like that, really.

She also recalls how she tried to organise some company-sponsored team building activities on a weekday, but only 3 people out of 35 joined, or when the Polish football team won a game, none of her colleagues was into common cheering and celebrating. She concludes, perhaps as a self-preservation mechanism that Polish people are simply introverted and reserved, not willing to show their emotions. She says:

(...) they don't believe to my emotions. They say that everything I'm expressing is most probably fake because 'why would you do that?' (...) they say I'm overreacting to everything (...) So the first thing I was learning to do was to keep my emotions inside.

Here we can also see an example of a conditional form of acceptance – the underlying expectation to conform to the emotional standards/expectations of her colleagues. An extreme form of such conditionality is moral control, which in the case of Yuliya, is strongly linked to age, gender and nationality. The interviewee says that since she works hard, naturally she also 'plays hard', meaning that she needs to relax to the same extent as she's working. She recalls that when she organised a welcome party, her male colleagues confronted her with a 'challenge' related to drinking vodka, a kind of provocation embedded in a strong cultural stereotype. When it turns out that she can drink more than her Polish male colleagues in the office, she is immediately reprimanded: "if you want to find a husband, you will not do it in this way!". But as Yuliya emphasises, did not come to Poland to find a husband.

### Insulting tirades

Yuliya also encountered moralising talks from her colleague at a company event, who had an alcoholic moment of honesty, and 'accused' her of making the wrong social choices.

(...) when I asked why do you/ what exactly do you mean, the guy specified who he considered as a wrong choice, and he said: "you are choosing people who are speaking loudly, who are smiling good, who are looking nice, but actually they are not so good". And I said like: "I'm sorry to say that but I'm choosing people who are like to me, who are speaking loudly, emotionally, who spend time outside and with whom I have some topics to discuss because they are interested in outside world" and so on. And he said: "no, you should/ if you would be more clever/ but yes you are/ Ukrainian girls are all like that, they are choosing/" but I think it's jealousy to those good looking guys.

This passage is interesting in the light of the fragments quoted earlier, because it seems that while her colleagues are not facilitating her social integration in the office, at the same time they feel entitled to make patronising, critical comments on her own efforts to socialise. Also, they fail to treat her as an individual, but assign her the category of 'all Ukrainian girls'.

Another example of such oppression which Yuliya quotes happened after 6 months of her stay, at a corporate party in Turkey, when alcohol once again untwisted her colleagues' tongues:

(...) drunk people are saying things I would never expect, like "oh it's so nice to have you in our office because we have someone to observe because you are behaving not like us" someone said "not like normal people"

By putting Yuliya down in the role of the marginal man (Stonequist, 1961) they are perhaps defending the social position which they had probably fought hard for while trying to move up the Polish social ladder, and being the aspiring middle class themselves. An analytically interesting observation made by Yuliya is that she experiences much more of this hostility from people around her age, who are in their early 30s and not from the more senior colleagues, who according to the interview are at least polite in their manner.

On the other hand, she is facing more 'accusations' from the older colleagues and is somehow expected to assume an unfamiliar, undesired identity – in this context – of a refugee. She recalls:

(...) Another thing I faced like, this was actually coming from senior people, from who are about 50, they were coming on some corporate parties or events with a big sorrow

for what is happening now in Ukraine<sup>6</sup> and they were saying "you, my dear, are running from this.." and I said "refugee? really (laughs) you think so?" and that was/they were saying like "yes yes we can understand, you were like avoiding all this", and I said: "to be honest I was not avoiding, I was very actively participating in Maidan events".

Yuliya feels offended that the older 'polite' colleagues do not understand but are neither willing to learn, and prefer to impose on her an unfamiliar identity, especially that she says the relocation job offer came when the situation in Ukraine stabilised.

### The power of the eye

Helena Flam and Brigitte Beauzamy recall a few classic statements regarding the power of the human gaze, e.g. Cooley's (1970) 'looking-glass self' and point out that (...) our self-definition and emotional well-being is a composite of how we see ourselves, how others see us and how we think others see us, constituting our identity (Flam and Beauzamy, 2008, p. 222). In such understanding, staring or deliberately ignoring others might be an act of symbolic violence. The (...) gaze can turn into an instrument of superordination, superiority and contempt, of surveillance, control and discipline (ibidem), whereas the averted gaze will be the conscious failure to acknowledge the other's presence or even existence.

Yuliya also experiences being stared at, moreover, she is offered an explanation. Here

<sup>6</sup> Here Yuliya is referring to the Euromaidan, also called the Ukrainian Spring. This was a series of pro-European protests that started in November 2013 in Kyiv at the Maidan (The Square), which met with a violent reaction of the Berkut riot police. They evolved into revolutionary nationwide demonstrations, escalating in February 2014, with over 100 protesters killed by the pro-government forces.

she quotes the honest feedback of a drunk colleague at an office party:

*(...) "Oh, it's so nice to have you in our office because we have someone to observe because you are behaving not like us' someone said 'not like normal people."*

I would risk the interpretation that this act of both bodily and verbal rejection is the experience of Yuliya because she is a woman from Ukraine. Unfortunately, I have no empirical data to prove this, but as a working hypothesis, I would claim that such comments would have never been made towards e.g. a German or English colleague, whether male or female.

On the same party-occasion, Yuliya is also being asked the annoying 'migrant' questions:

*(...) there was a case when a guy came to say/ to introduce himself and he asked: "you are speaking English, where are you from?" and when I said "from Ukraine" he said "ah, come on, be honest, no jokes" (laughs) and I said after that I don't know how can we proceed after this comment because I don't even want to ask what does it mean no jokes.*

Through such comments, the natives reinforce the symbolic pecking order and mark clear boundaries between themselves and their foreign colleagues.

### Discourses of suspicion – the case of Alena

The story of Alena, a 34-year-old Belarusian with Polish roots who came to Poland in 2004 is a different example, as she migrated in the year of Poland's accession to the EU when it was still not so common to meet migrants from the former USSR in white-collar jobs. Alena's original plan was to do a PhD but since she had to earn for a living she quickly found

a job in a Human Resources agency, whose boss was English. Alena's tasks included handling the recruitment process of Polish blue-collar workers heading for the UK. She recalls being asked the typical annoying 'migrant' questions:

*(...) In this agency there were people with different education, yes, different views and general and here I had a real clash with reality, e.g. when I would invite someone to an interview, and the guy instead of fixing the appointment would start: "You, where are you actually from?"; "What are you doing here in Poland?". And yes, it was all unpleasant, because these were specific [flirtatious, sexual – A.D] suggestions... (...) Generally speaking, the less prestigious the profession [of the interlocutor – A.D] was, the more of such specific clues were created, "How did you get here?"; "And what are you doing here?" And yes, the question "What are you doing here" contained a variety of hints as to what I was doing here.*

Alena has to explain and justify her presence in Poland in a recruiter's position, calling it a clash with reality. Being a representative of an underprivileged group, she shouldn't be occupying such superior position 'reserved' for the ones 'higher in the social hierarchy', perhaps her English boss. It is 'unheard of' that a Belarusian would be higher in the symbolic hierarchy sending Polish workers to the British Isles for the same purposes as her clients would have expected her to come to Poland. By resorting to the only available to them repertoire of regaining a symbolic sense of dignity – insulting comments and offensive suggestions – they can once again feel a sense of native superiority. The next job that Alena quickly moves to is an advertising agency, where she does a lot of business travelling eastwards, and then for a change, she is suspected at the border of working for a different

kind of 'agency', although such comments come from Ukrainian border guards:

*(...) Once, I was also flying to Kyiv, to my client then and.., it was also a shock to me that I had a Belarusian passport, I do not need a visa to enter the territory of Ukraine, at least I did not need it, now I do not know, and the customs officer at the airport really did a biographical interview, he asked me about my life, I don't know if he was checking if I really work somewhere full-time, etc., it was really quite unpleasant. (...) he made me feel that he senses some kind of conspiracy that a young woman, who lives alone, without her family somewhere there, it is simply impossible for her to work in such a normal way, full-time at an advertising agency. Either it's a weird ad agency or another agency<sup>7</sup>.*

What she says a moment later testifies for such acts of symbolic violence to be the result of her age and nationality:

*(...) And, of course, [this happens – A.D] when crossing the Polish-Belarusian border when I'm going home, not now, because I'm getting older, maybe it's not proper, besides, now I have double citizenship.*

Therefore, being older, having a Polish ID she is less prone to experiencing such insulting tirades and gets immunity to the scrutiny of border officials.

### Foreign accent

Alena has Polish roots and with time she obtains Polish citizenship. Yet, despite her official status, she still attracts unwanted attention due to her eastern accent.

*(...) I know, and I can feel it very well that when I call someone for the first time, what I say, I am aware of my accent that I will never get rid of, and I feel suspension on the other side for 30 seconds, they don't focus too much on what I'm saying, they just listen.*

During the interview, when I asked Alena directly about her experiences of being confronted with national stereotypes, she summed up:

*(...) I experienced one thing, that the higher the status of the person I am talking to, the higher the social status, yes, or the more well mannered, let's say, the better the person is brought up, then the fewer problems arise on the basis of who I am, where I am from and what I do.*

Thus, Alena attributes the occurrences of symbolic violence to the level of cultural, social or educational capital.

### Concluding remarks

This article discussed how highly-skilled female migrants from two former USSR republics to Poland – Belarus and Ukraine experience acts of symbolic violence in everyday interactions with the natives, but also with compatriots or public officials. Using the intersectional analytical framework I showed how the interplay of three social categories: nationality, age and gender affects their everyday experience of living and working in Poland with Polish colleagues, but also how historical circumstances (the year of migration) can influence the attitudes of the local population. Teun Van Dijk (2000) argues that one does not have to be a self-proclaimed racist to engage in occasional racist practices, just as one does not have to be permanently hostile towards migrants to engage in more or less frequent occurrences of staring, ignoring, bodily and social

<sup>7</sup> Here she means a brothel, as in Polish such institutions are called 'escort agencies'.

rejection, being asked infuriating questions, hearing insulting tirades, conditional forms of acceptance, in fact, these could even be single manifestations. Still, this does not change in any way the fact that the migrants do not feel socially welcome nor get the expected treatment of highly-skilled experts doing their job within the expat standards. Instead, they repeatedly have to prove their skills and legitimacy to practice their profession.

On the macro level, these migrants were encouraged to come to Poland and could benefit from certain institutional facilitations. It was rather on the micro level that these women experienced unequal treatment through interaction with the members of the host country. These occurrences should be attributed to the (...) *mental models of individual group members which account for individual discourses and acts of discrimination* (Van Dijk, 2000). From the structuralist perspective of Salvatore Babones, the Polish semi-periphery and its state institutions (...) *instead of helping its citizens in exploiting abroad, (...) they support the local elites in exploiting its own societies* (Babones, 2016). Therefore, some Polish individuals, frustrated and tired with the fact of having been exploited for over two decades of the transformation by the progressing neoliberal market economy, will seize the opportunity to place themselves higher when they get the chance of 'competing' with qualified migrants. It gives, however, a short term satisfaction, because as Babones (ibidem) observes, when comparing the status of the Central-East European countries in relation to the Western European countries now and at the beginning of the 20th century, their relation and position is exactly the same. ☹

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## **Intersekcjonalność przemocy symbolicznej wobec wysoko wykwalifikowanych migrantek w Polsce**

### **Abstrakt**

Artykuł poddaje analizie przejawy przemocy symbolicznej, czyli niefizycznej krzywdy jakiej doświadczają wysoko wykwalifikowane migrantki z Białorusi i Ukrainy. Wykorzystując podejście intersekcjonalne, pokazuję jak trzy kategorie społeczne: narodowość, wiek i płeć wpływają na ich codzienne doświadczenie życia i pracy w sektorze korporacyjnym w Polsce z polskimi współpracownikami. Używając przykładów z wywiadów pogłębionych z migrantkami analizuję konkretne akty przemocy symbolicznej jak wpatrywanie się, ignorowanie, odrzucenie społeczne, podwójne standardy, zadawanie irytujących pytań, wysłuchiwanie obraźliwych tyrad, warunkowe formy akceptacji, dyskursy podejrzeń, wytykanie obcego akcentu. Będąc młodymi cudzoziemskimi specjalistkami pochodzącymi z republik byłego ZSRR, moje rozmówczynie stoją wbrew normatywnym oczekiwaniom przedstawicieli społeczeństwa przyjmującego zaburzając symboliczne struktury władzy, co skutkuje doświadczaniem przez nie różnych form i stopni symbolicznej opresji. Paradoks ich sytuacji polega na tym, że na makro poziomie migrantki te są zachęcane do przyjazdu do Polski i mogą skorzystać z szeregu ułatwień instytucjonalnych, ale na poziomie mikro doświadczają nierównego traktowania podczas interakcji z przedstawicielami społeczeństwa goszczącego.

### **Słowa kluczowe:**

przemoc symboliczna, narodowość, wiek i płeć, wysoko wykwalifikowane migrantki, Ukrainki, Białorusinki, Polska jako kraj goszczący.