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Agency of Migrant Youth in Hostile Sociopolitical Environments: Case Studies from Central Eastern Europe

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Abstract: This paper compares the integration of third-country youth in Poland and Hungary in two Central Eastern European contexts characterized by a hostile sociopolitical environment for migrants, right-wing policies, illiberalism, and regression in various related policy areas. Our article is based on a three-year EU-funded research project that investigated the integration of migrant youth in precarious circumstances (MIMY). It uses data from qualitative interviews conducted with migrant youth and thus focuses on the migrant's perspective while exploring how coping and navigating such hostile environments occurs. The analysis is based on the concept of migrant agency in extremely difficult and complex sociopolitical situations. Our findings highlight the particular importance of the latter in these hostile environments. We argue that while the withdrawal of the state from integration has created difficult contexts for migrant youth, they exhibit different forms of agency, enabling them to adapt to opportunity structures. While these forms of agency are important and real, the structural constraints imposed by hostile states' anti-immigration and anti-integration attitudes significantly limit migrants' options for coping with everyday life.

Keywords: migrant agencies; hostile sociopolitical environments; embedding processes; coping



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1. Introduction

Our paper aims to identify different characteristics and dimensions of migrant agencies in a Central East European context, namely, in Hungary and Poland. Specifically, we try to explain how the different types of agency of migrant youth emerge and manifest in “hostile environments”. Moreover, we discuss how these types of agency support young migrants' processes of social embedding, taking into account the various constraints and obstacles to this in two countries that constitute examples of hostile environments. We argue that such agencies are crucial for coping and embedding processes, but they emerge in different forms and develop in response to the characteristics of these environments.

First, we explain why the sociopolitical environment in Hungary and Poland could be seen as hostile to migrants. We focus mainly on the discursive, legal, and political factors that lead to a hostile attitude towards newcomers from non-European countries in both states. We then provide a brief overview of the theoretical framework of agency. For the purposes of this article, we conceptualize agency as a processual, evolving characteristic of individual migrants that is highly situational and dependent on contextual (structural) constraints and opportunities. Before analyzing selected case studies that show the agency of young migrants in different dimensions, we briefly present the methodological framework of the study. The empirical part of the article is based on an analysis of the stories of five migrants that shows how agency manifests. The individual cases were selected to present

how migrants' agency is constructed in different but interrelated areas of integration, such as education, work, and health/well-being. In the concluding part of the article, we try to systematize the patterns of agency based on the selected cases that also apply to a different extent to other migrants.

1.1. Hungary and Poland as Hostile Environments for Migrants

In contrast to modern Western European societies, Central Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Poland have only relatively recently experienced mass immigration after a long period of stasis or only emigration. Supporting the smooth integration of migrants was not and is not on the agenda in these countries; on the contrary, as we will describe later, they tend to discourage certain groups of migrants from coming and staying. However, a closer look at their migration policies reveals clear signs of a neoliberal approach to migration that involves applying double standards by distinguishing between "desired" and "undesirable" migrants (on the European moral economies of deservingness, see [Tosic and Streinzer 2022](#)).

The economies of both countries are struggling with growing labor shortages due to their aging populations and the increasing emigration of their most capable workforce—mainly to Western EU countries—yet their political elites strongly reject immigration as a solution to this challenge. Government policies reflect the internal contradiction and inherent injustice of immigration policies: the governments' discourse encourages rejection of immigration and stirs up racist media discourse against migrants ([Bernáth and Messing 2016](#); [Gerő and Sik 2020](#)) while supporting (strictly controlled and temporary) labor migration ([Meszmann 2022](#)). Poland identifies nationalities for which immigration and working conditions are facilitated (Ukrainian, Belarussian, Russian, Moldovan, Georgian, and Armenian), while Hungary issues temporary work permits to people of selected nationalities who work for local suppliers of multinational companies, mediated through employment agencies.

Regarding forced migration and integration support¹, both Poland and Hungary are extremely restrictive. Since 2015, the number of people granted any kind of international protection in Poland has dropped significantly to around 400 people per year ([Migracje.Gov 2022](#)). Poland legalized pushback in national law in October 2021, and the Polish–Belarusian border has become militarized. Hungary erected a physical fence on its Schengen border that prevents forced migrants from entering the country and applying for asylum, dismantled all refugee-support infrastructure (including reception centers), and its government has actively engaged in and promoted anti-immigrant propaganda since 2015 ([Gerő and Sik 2020](#)). In 2021, only 40 people successfully applied for asylum in Hungary.

In the following sections, we describe what we refer to as hostile environments and non-integration regimes. To this end, we look at areas that constitute the conditions of an integration environment in which migrants strive to build a new life: the discursive environment and the legal and political environment. While we acknowledge the differences between the two countries, we focus on the (similar) constraints and obstacles migrants have faced in both countries, particularly since 2015.

1.2. Discursive Environment

The right-wing populist governments of both countries have played the "immigration card" extensively since 2015. In Hungary, the discourse on immigration changed dramatically as early as the beginning of 2015. At that time, Prime Minister Orbán began to openly criticize migration policies in Europe, praising Hungary as a culturally homogeneous, Christian country that resists mainstream European discourse on the benefits of cultural and ethnic diversity. In the same year, his government launched an unprecedented hate campaign against "migrants" and "migration" in general, using a wide range of propaganda tools, including an anti-migration poster campaign, a push poll, and the portrayal of immigrants as the greatest threat to the cultural, economic, and social stability of Hungary and Europe ([Gerő and Sik 2020](#); [Bernáth and Messing 2016](#); [Cantat 2023](#)). In Poland, the

right-wing Law and Justice party, which took power at the height of the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015, came to office with a strong anti-immigration agenda. The narrative of the newly elected Polish government was that of “closed doors” and a systematic refusal to accept any refugees. Nevertheless, on the level of political discourse, we see many similarities between the two countries (Goździak and Márton 2018).

The attitudes of the population towards asylum seekers show the effects of the hostile political discourses: European Social Survey data show that the Polish population has a slightly more negative attitude towards immigrants than the EU average and broadly rejects forced migrants from Muslim countries². Hungarians are homogeneously hostile towards migrants of all kinds and are located at the extreme end of the European attitudinal map (Messing and Ságvári 2021). Attitudes remained very negative in Hungary over the half-decade between 2014 and 2019 and worsened significantly in Poland from 2017 to 2019 (disapproval of migrants increased from 14% to 20%). Attitudes towards forced migrants show the same trend: a significant decrease in the number of Poles supporting the reception of refugees (CBOS 2021).

1.3. Legal and Policy Framework of Migrant Integration

Both Hungary and Poland can be described as non-immigration societies in the European context. Due to their similar history as closed and ethnically homogeneous societies with communist regimes, neither country has had a significant racially or/and culturally diverse migrant population or any experience with migrant integration. Moreover, migration and multiculturalism were not on the political agenda in either country until mid-2010, when right-wing populist parties felt the need to thematize immigration.

Until the mid-2010s, the migration and integration policies of both countries adopted—often only to the degree necessary—EU standards and primarily relied on the frameworks and guidelines offered by the EU. Integration policies and measures were a combination of EU-inspired and ad hoc measures (Okólski and Wach 2020; Kováts 2013). The major turnaround in the approach to immigration and integration policies took place in both countries after 2015. Poland abolished state migration policy in 2016 by repealing the “Polish Migration Policy—Current Status and Postulated Measures” (Polityka Migracyjna Polski)—which had been in effect since 2012. Following the state’s withdrawal from facilitating immigrant integration, a “local turn” in migration policy (both migration and integration policy) has been observed in Poland (Ślęzak and Bielewska 2022). In contrast to the anti-migration discourse of the right-wing ruling party, many local authorities in cities such as Warsaw, Gdansk, Krakow, Wrocław, and Poznan have taken on the task of migration management and created various migrant-friendly local policies. In practice, it is mainly non-governmental organizations that implement local policies and work with migrants. As their resources are limited, they mainly focus on target groups such as children, unaccompanied minors, asylum seekers, and refugees or mothers.

In Hungary, after 2015, a number of legal and regulatory changes were introduced in relation to the refugee support system. The first major attempt at preventing forced migrants from entering and staying in Hungary was the so-called “border closure” in September 2015. Along with the erection of a barbed-wire fence on the Serbian–Hungarian border, a “legal wall” was erected that involved labeling asylum-seekers “illegal” and blocking their entry into Hungary. In addition, the already weak institutions for the integration of immigrants and refugees were dismantled. This included the closure of reception centers, the abolition of so-called “integration contracts”, which provided financial support for those granted legal status, and the establishment of a closed, prison-like “transit zone” at the border. Furthermore, by declaring Serbia a “safe country” and introducing the criterion of “inadmissibility”, the Hungarian state abolished the possibility of applying for asylum of those who come to the EU via the Balkan route. In addition, the “Stop Soros” Act of 2018 targeted non-governmental organizations that provide humanitarian assistance to asylum seekers. These laws indicated three significant changes: (1) the closure of Hungary to asylum seekers, (2) the dismantling of refugee procedures and the integration system, and

(3) significant legal threats to key integration actors (NGOs). Despite all these measures, migrant integration projects are run by a few Budapest-based NGOs, which face constant financial difficulty, threats from the government, and general anti-migrant sentiment. These constraints strongly impact the conditions and opportunities for migrant integration. With no systemic support, migrants are typically left alone to adapt to their new environment.

As the above description indicates, both countries have undergone a strong negative turn at the discursive and policy/legislative level concerning their approach to immigrants and asylum seekers, more specifically. However, compared to the Polish government, the Hungarian regime has traveled further down the road of exclusionary politics and policy measures. While we have indicated both similarities and some differences between the two countries, our main argument is that the latter have created “hostile environments” for migrants. The description of both contexts was aimed at highlighting the kind of constraints and obstacles migrants may meet with in Poland and Hungary. The purpose was not to conduct a comparative analysis but to treat data from both countries as complementary. The types of agency of migrants identified in the course of our analysis may apply to both countries.

2. Theoretical Framework

The “hostile environments” described above and the withdrawal of the states from developing integration policies create a constraining sociopolitical context for migrants. However, in this article, we aim to analyze how the latter display their agency and mobilize different resources when coping with complex and challenging situations.

We understand agency broadly as the “capacity for social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take action to achieve their desires” (Bakewell 2010, p. 1694). Hence, this includes both migrants’ ability to reflect on and negotiate their situation, and involving taking into account structural opportunities and behavioral components (enactments)—namely, the coping strategies they apply. Although we focus here on agency, by no means do we wish to undervalue the role of structure and its impact on people’s choices and decisions. On the contrary, while writing about a “hostile environment”, we emphasize that structural constraints and limited opportunity structures may restrict migrants’ mobility or limit their access to various services and resources.

At the same time, we do not want to portray migrant people as passive victims, uprooted, and counting on help (Malkki 1995, 1996). Therefore, in line with Richmond’s (1993) suggestion (to reject the strict dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary migration), we include in our sample refugees, asylum seekers, and economic and family migrants too. Although we take into account that certain rights and entitlements attached to these legal categories are crucial elements of opportunity structures, we do not want to essentialize and make far-reaching assumptions based only on the type of migration or legal status. Moreover, within the maze of complex legal and administrative rules, migrants may pragmatically navigate different policy solutions. For instance, although many Ukrainians who came to Poland after the war in Donbas in 2014 are de facto forced migrants, very few apply for international protection but instead choose one of the solutions available to “economic” migrants, such as temporary residence or a “simplified procedure”.

We argue that migrants display agency both at an individual and collective level, which position is in line with the emphasis on the relational character of agency and its ability to transform social structure: “*To be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degrees of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree*” (Sewell 1992, p. 20).

We are interested in (migrant) agency not simply in its own right as a concept but because it strongly informs our understanding of migrant integration processes, or as we would prefer to conceptualize it, the social dynamics of *embedding* (Ryan and Mulholland 2015; also, Ryan 2018). The latter emphasizes the *processual* nature of these *multi-layered and multidirectional* social dynamics. While embeddedness (Korinek et al. 2005, p. 794) has been used in different migration-related disciplines to describe and explain elements of migrant

mobilities, it is a static concept. Embedding, on the other hand (Ryan and Mulholland 2015), suggests a more active stance and is developed into the concept of “differentiated embedding” to “explore how migrants negotiate attachment and belonging as interconnected temporal, spatial and relational processes” (Ryan 2018, p. 233). The “differentiated” notion of embedding suggests varied degrees of attachment and belonging in different social and structural settings.

In this paper, we study migrant agencies to understand different stages and situations of differentiated embedding—the often back-and-forth “game” of moving towards greater inclusion and periods of backsliding—without suggesting any kind of linearity whatsoever in these processes. In our view, migrant agency plays a central role in such digressing, multidirectional, and multi-layered processes of embedding since it is the individual who needs to take action and make informed decisions about their life, choose between different options, etc. In addition, in hostile environments and contexts of (state-)institutional abandonment, such as in Hungary or Poland, individual migrant agency, in many regards, is a *must*.

We conceptualize agency as a dynamically evolving feature of individual migrants; a characteristic that is highly *situative*, meaning that it *manifests differently across time and space*, depending on the actual contextual (structural) limitations and opportunities. On the other hand, it also represents *potential that may or may not evolve into its complete form or manifestation depending on different factors, most of which are environmental ones that emerge from the sociopolitical settings of a given society and the closer social (micro)-setting*. Thus, on the one hand, migrants’ agency depends on their resources, capitals, and opportunity structures at a particular moment; on the other hand, as stated above, it may contribute to building differentiated embedding and accumulating capitals (social, economic, or cultural).

The selection of our cases was based on the idea that those with positive experiences of integration, which our empirical work was able to capture, tell us about instances and situations in which individuals “pushed” their agency to its full or nearly full potential in an otherwise highly restrictive environment. By analyzing these cases, we can detect the boundaries of migrant agency in hostile, non-integrationist, or exclusionist environments. With this approach, we also suggest that we think of agency as a scalar concept whereby individual agencies are situated on a spectrum. We also need to remind ourselves that these differentiated (individual) agencies change dynamically over time and in relation to various situations that have mutual and strong impacts (as we will point out later in the analysis, obtaining agency in one sphere—e.g., in education—directly impacts evolving agencies in other spheres—e.g., work).

3. Data and Methods

This paper is based on data collected between January 2021 and February 2022³ as part of the Horizon 2020 research project “eMpowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable condition” (MIMY). The project focuses on the integration processes of young third-country migrants in vulnerable conditions in nine European countries⁴.

The aforementioned project included a participatory approach; thus, we worked closely with peer researchers (Bell et al. 2021). In Hungary, three peer researchers were engaged with the project from Sudan, Indonesia, and Egypt. In Poland, we worked with six peer researchers from Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Tajikistan. The decision to work with peer researchers was primarily driven by both methodological and ethical considerations related to (1) a desire to avoid asymmetrical power relations between researchers and the research group, (2) an attempt to amplify the voices of marginalized groups, and (3) seeking ways of producing knowledge more democratically and sharing it with a broader audience (Pincock et al. 2021). Peer researchers were first invited to participate in the training sessions that covered the main issues connected with doing interviews and familiarized them with MIMY’s project methodology. Then, depending on their availability and willingness, they were engaged in recruitment, conducting interviews, translations, making notes and transcripts, and partially in the process of analysis, particularly in the case of interviews with migrants who had positive experiences of integration.

The project adhered to the rigorous ethical standards regarding informed consent, interviewing, data processing, and preserving the anonymity of research with migrants (Happ 2021). The research plan was approved by the ethics committees of both partner universities of the MIMY project in Poland and Hungary. Alongside such “procedural ethics” (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), we also pursued a reflexive ethical stance to ensure non-victimization (van den Hoonaard 2018).

The data come from semi-structured individual interviews with young (16–30-year-old) migrants in vulnerable conditions (forty semi-structured in-depth interviews in Poland; thirty-four in Hungary) and with young migrants with positive integration experiences (eleven interviews in Poland and eleven in Hungary)⁵ (for further details, see Appendix A). Both vulnerable conditions and “positive experiences of integration” were understood broadly and discussed with peer researchers in the project. We flexibly defined the factors of vulnerability and avoided imposing the “vulnerability” label on interviewees. With the peer researchers, we identified young foreigners who might have an experience of vulnerability in some way, such as precarious living, working or educational conditions, being asylum seekers, or having mental health problems. The former category (positive experiences of integration) was exemplified by young migrants who had achieved specific forms of recognition or public visibility in their milieus.

The research interviews within the MIMY project were conducted with migrants with different legal statuses, such as migrants with work visas, student visas, or having different types of international protection (asylum seekers, refugees), as well as some who had come to Poland and Hungary with their families as minors. The sample was also very diverse in terms of country of origin. Although the majority of interviewees in Poland were from Ukraine, Belarus, and Tajikistan, some were from more distant countries. Interviewees in Hungary had very diverse national backgrounds, including those of African origin and countries from the MENA region.

The interviews addressed several main themes. One of them touched upon the challenges and vulnerabilities that young migrants have experienced and were experiencing at the moment of interview. Another theme was specific coping strategies and resources that had helped them during their migration trajectories. Yet another broad topic was dealing with “integration”. More specifically, we were interested in perceptions of integration, such as whether our interviewees felt integrated in Poland and Hungary, and their place of residence and what factors facilitated and hindered this process. All the interviews were subsequently thematically analyzed to identify sources of vulnerabilities, ways of coping, and emerging migrant agencies.

For this article and to answer the main research question, “How do different types of agency of young migrants emerge and manifest in ‘hostile environments?’”, we returned to data about agency in two crucial areas of integration, namely, education and the labor market (but also touching upon other areas, such as legal status, health, and housing). We took a case study approach, which was suitable for highlighting the young migrant’s lived experiences and perspectives while presenting the contextual complexity through which they must navigate (Yin 2009). Focusing on several case studies and describing them in a detailed manner was necessary for illustrating the interplay between structural constraints stemming from a hostile environment and migrants’ agency. Therefore, the cases presented in this article were selected purposively. Among the dozens of interviews with young migrants conducted in each country, we identified the areas (education, work, well-being) in which the agency of the interviewees most often manifested. After identifying these areas, we selected five narratives that illustrate the types of agency we identified in our sample. We would like to emphasize that while we cannot speak of representativity here, the types of agency and their enactment in a hostile political and discursive environment that are discussed are characteristic of our sample. In the following sections, we will present some of the established ideal types of agency. The latter represent the core of our argument since they inform the generic concept of agency revealed through empirical data that emerges from the challenging environments in CEE, and further, because they

unmask important aspects of the enactment of individual forms of migrant agency (despite severe constraints and occasional backsliding). Thus, in the sections that follow, we present answers to the question of how agencies are constituted in hostile environments.

4. Results

4.1. Instrumental Agency: Agency in Education Is an Important Tool for Navigating Difficult Labor Market Conditions

Education is a key area of integration and social mobility. For a “newcomer”, access to education, especially free public education, presents many challenges. In Hungary, state institutions are not obliged to admit anyone beyond the age of compulsory education (sixteen years of age). In Poland, foreigners can attend schools or other educational institutions until the age of eighteen and have the same rights as citizens. Higher education at public universities is free for Poles, citizens of EU Member States, and foreigners with a “Pole’s card” (*Karta Polaka*, a document issued to people who can prove their Polish roots and some knowledge of Polish) or a residence card.

In both countries, but particularly in Hungary, knowledge of the language may constitute a significant barrier, and since free language education is rare (some courses are organized by local NGOs), migrants who cannot afford language courses at market prices find it difficult to enter education. In Poland, the vast majority of migrants come from Slavic countries, which are culturally and linguistically similar, but the language barrier is mentioned as a challenge.

Considering that qualifications acquired in third countries are not recognised, obtaining a diploma improves one’s chances in the labor market. However, as the following stories show, foreigners who do not have the required (permanent) residence permit must pay tuition fees. Some cannot afford this; others are forced to combine studies with at least a part-time job. Moreover, educational qualifications from TCN countries are not recognised in Hungary. For example, a Hungarian primary school leaving certificate is required to obtain a driving license (and the lack of such a certificate may limit opportunities in the labor market), while the Hungarian baccalaureate exempts the applicant from the history and citizenship exam required as part of the citizenship procedure or shortens the application procedure.

Two case studies that focus on education illustrate how migrants overcome these challenges to achieve their educational goals, which facilitates their embedding in the host countries.

4.1.1. Vlad and Boyko

Vlad (eighteen years old) and Boyko (nineteen) are brothers who come from Ukraine. After the war in Donbas, their parents started to consider emigration. In 2017, they came to Poland with Vlad, fourteen at the time, to register him for high school in Poland. He did not know the language, so was rejected by several schools, but finally managed to find one. He lived in a boarding house and one of the educators was his legal guardian. First grade was difficult because of the language barrier and age difference (in Ukraine, children start school earlier; he was 2–3 years younger than the others). Nevertheless, he devoted a lot of time to learning the language and vocabulary and to his beloved hobby—sailing boats—and managed to pass the exams for the first grade, though not without problems. During high school, he was motivated to work hard as he realized that “*high school is already a path to university*”. Living in Poland on his own as a minor turned out to be more difficult than expected, so after a year, his father joined him, and they rented a small apartment together. In addition to attending school, Vlad worked in the construction business with his father. “*Unfortunately, I don’t do sailing now; I wanted to earn money for my studies and other things. I bought a laptop, but it has very little memory, so I need to buy several extra drives. Generally, it would be better to have a desktop computer, but I didn’t have this opportunity because we don’t have a cable internet connection, we use our SIM cards, so I chose a laptop, and it works*”.

The lack of a stable internet connection made it difficult for him to attend all of his school classes during the pandemic.

After a few more months, the rest of the family (Boyko—Vlad’s brother, his mother, and a younger sister) joined them, and they all moved into a house in a nearby small village. Boyko, who had already started learning Polish in Ukraine, started studying marine engineering at one of the good universities in a neighboring city. Vlad wanted to study at the same university but had to choose another one (less prestigious, but cheaper). He explains, *“I thought I could study for free because I graduated from high school here, but they told me I could not study because I do not have a residence card, and I have been waiting for [it] for over three years, almost three-and-a-half years. I have sent reminders, I have written to them, I have gone to the offices, I have asked how my case is going, and they always answer me: ‘Yes, yes, it will be done soon’.”*

At the time of the interviews, during the summer break, both brothers were working full time in a kebab restaurant, but they both knew that they could not combine this job with their studies as their shift finishes at one or two in the morning. In the future, both brothers would like to settle in northern Poland, close to where they currently live. Boyko, who also took up sailing in Ukraine, plans to design ships or work in a shipyard. Vlad, who is interested in Japanese manga and is studying multimedia and graphic design, dreams of making cartoons in the future.

Vlad’s and Boyko’s migration paths reveal strategic planning to improve their life chances in the long term by obtaining a higher-education diploma in the EU. They realized this plan required sacrifices in the short term, such as the parting of family members during a period of transnational life, coping with difficult economic and housing situations, and giving up sports, etc. We stress that their individual agencies and determination to pursue an educational path are supported by their parents, who struggle with precarious legal situations. The difficult economic situation of the family forces the boys to work to earn money for their studies and other needs, such as a computer. Both brothers reported that they spend a lot of time at home with their family when not at work or university and do not have too much contact with their peers. In their narratives, we see the constraints posed by structural (legal and economic) conditions on the one hand, and on the other, how young migrants’ agency manifests in the persistent, step-by-step pursuit of educational aspirations.

4.1.2. James

James (32) arrived in Hungary in 2014 from the Middle-East. He had abandoned his university studies back home before coming to Europe. He had work experience from working in his father’s company as a sales representative. After his arrival, he lived in different reception centers for over a year before he received refugee status. Even then, without money, work, a place to live, or knowing the language, his situation was not easy. From the beginning, he made sure he used any opportunity to learn the language. He signed up for all language courses advertised by civil organizations to help refugees and migrants. These were ad hoc, primarily based on the availability of funding. James understood that studying and being in education would improve his chances of integration, becoming acquainted with people, and learning about the country he had arrived in. Soon he also realized that having educational certificates would open up doors to further opportunities. *“I was happy because I could learn [. . .] without paying money. And I also joined some Hungarian language courses with some NGOs. I tried to grab all opportunities to develop myself, to upgrade myself, to integrate into society. As I joined these courses, my English became better; I also found friends in Budapest . . . Hungarian or other foreigners”.*

James joined several Hungarian language courses run by NGOs. In the context of such limited resources, he might be considered “lucky”, but his rapid exploitation of such opportunities had more to do with his previous education and his sense of the value of education for social mobility (in Bourdeausian terms, he was endowed with sufficient cultural capitals from earlier periods of life). Becoming acquainted the activities of these

civil organizations and listening to what they had to offer, he quickly learned about further educational opportunities, subject to his Hungarian- and English-language knowledge. At a local international university, a weekend adult education program provided asylum seekers and refugees with information about various areas of life in Hungary and a space for exchange, friendship, and belonging. Here, James also attended courses on creative writing and theatre since the former is his passion and hobby. At a local Hungarian NGO, he also learned about an opportunity to attend evening classes at a local gymnasium to obtain a “matura” (a secondary school leaving exam). As this document is crucial for obtaining better job opportunities and accessing higher education in Hungary, James decided to enroll in these classes. After a year of learning, he passed his exams in all subjects. After his matura, another opportunity came his way. *“One day, a friend asked me, ‘Do you want to learn how to drive a bus?’. And I was thinking, [no!], no one in my family knows how to drive a bus. He [my friend] said, ‘no, there is an opportunity, you can join, learn it, it’s for six months, and they will already pay you not a full salary but something’.”*

He joined the course, and although his Hungarian was still not up to the mark, the instructors helped him. *“In the beginning, I could only say, ‘Hi, I’m James’, but that was it. So it was a big challenge. [laughs]. I had six or seven exams in Hungarian; it was a big challenge. When the trainer put up pictures and talked about them, about KRESZ [the highway code], I used my phone, and I got them translated.”* James became a driver for the local transport company in Budapest. He is liked by his colleagues and passengers, but he finds the responsibility too much. Momentarily, he is happy with his job, but he has further ambitions. He wants to return to higher education. *“I have a dream of studying at a university again. I don’t want to be a driver forever, you know. I want to study and learn something new.”*

Despite being in his early thirties, he does not feel too old to be a student again and recognizes the importance of obtaining a higher education diploma too. His immediate goal was to obtain Hungarian citizenship, for which he applied several months before the research interview was recorded. Being a student would also mean being mobile again and traveling freely in the world.

In James’ case, his agency in the area of education evolved relatively straightforwardly because of several “positive circumstances” (a combination of specific actors and situations, timing, and locality) in an otherwise hostile environment. First, he received support from NGOs and grassroots learning initiatives to further his studies (learning Hungarian, joining a professional driving course, and improving his soft skills in creative writing). Receiving support from civil society worked because of his attitude towards studying (formed priorly) and his firm ideas about the importance of education in his embedding process.

Through James’ story, we can study the evolution of individual agency, albeit limited due to the challenging immigration context. The “positive circumstances” listed above and his pre-existing disposition (various cultural capitals) contributed to its evolution. Being in the right place (moving from a countryside reception center to the capital city, where most NGOs are active) and following the “correct” sequence of steps (that is, appropriate strategic thinking) in and throughout the education process correspond to the instrumental character of agency. In this concrete case, it meant attending language courses in Hungarian, obtaining a Hungarian secondary school leaving exam, and enrolling in a professional course to become a driver. These steps proved crucial from the perspective of evolving (limited) agency and the embedding process.

4.2. Evolving Agencies of Migrant Youth in the Labor Market

Accessing the Hungarian labor market is not easy for a recently arrived, young third-country national. Besides legal issues (only recognized refugees and people under subsidiary protection can obtain a work permit), the language is a significant obstacle since most Hungarian employers look for Hungarian speakers. State-level recognition of foreign, non-EU diplomas, and qualifications is another obstacle. Discrimination and racism occur in all segments of the labor market and emerge in various forms. Young, non-European

migrants who do not speak the language or have connections to mainstream society soon realize that they have been left to their own devices (i.e., must rely on their own networks) and the least lucrative segments of the labor market (i.e., precarious forms of employment).

In Poland, the situation of young third-country nationals is somewhat better, as obtaining a work permit with either a permanent residence card or some kind of international protection status is possible. Moreover, despite its anti-immigration rhetoric, the government has introduced several initiatives for attracting migrants from neighboring countries to the Polish labor market. One of these is the so-called “simplified procedure”, which allows foreigners from several countries (including Ukraine and Belarus) to obtain employment without having to apply for a work permit. However, migrants with temporary residence cards or those employed by employment agencies are often in a very precarious situation. The biggest challenges for young migrants in the labor market are the lengthy procedures, becoming stuck in manual, low-paid jobs, and finding a job that matches their qualifications and aspirations.

4.2.1. Zakaria

Zakaria (35) arrived in Hungary in 2010 from Asia as an asylum seeker. After living in various refugee camps, he received subsidiary protection status for five years from the Hungarian authorities. This status grants access to the labor market, social services, residence permits, etc. After five years, the person under this protection category must reapply for the same status or complete refugee protection. Having obtained this subsidiary protection, Zakaria moved to Budapest in search of a job. A refugee assistance organization helped him find a place to rent, and he shared this with another refugee.

As Zakaria recalls, to find a job, he had to rely on ethnic networks based on regional belonging. After a short search, he was hired by a local Indian restaurant; as a person with subsidiary protection, he was officially entitled to take up employment. However, his income was very meager, hardly enough to survive. One day, he boarded a train to Vienna and looked for employment there, but since this was not legal (his papers allowed him to work only in Hungary), he did not stay for long. Upon his return, he started working for a kebab shop on one of Budapest’s busiest squares. This job lasted for a year. He moved from there to another kebab restaurant but had a personal conflict with the girlfriend of the owner of the enterprise; after this event, Zakaria was sacked and had to look for another job.

He decided to be his own master and open his own shop. By then, he had a Hungarian wife who was against him starting his own business. *“I had a lot of warfare with my wife because of the business”*. His wife considered him inexperienced, yet he felt confident because of his previous business experience in Pakistan. In the beginning, he did not have enough money to start his own business. An Afghani shop owner, himself a refugee, helped him to start his business on Narcisz Street in Budapest’s district VIII, known as a street full of ethnic enterprises. He gave him a loan and shop equipment and recommended a lawyer who could register the business.

Zakaria opened his first shop in a Chinese market. He began work at 6 a.m. every day. Since he originally had no car, he carried the ingredients to his shop by hand. He was lucky and sales were good, but the local authorities closed the Chinese market after two months. This happened suddenly, and he had not been informed about it in advance, so he had to “rescue” his shop equipment and keep it in his own flat. Fortunately, within a short time, he managed to rent another space for his shop. In 2015, when many asylum seekers suddenly came to Hungary, his kebab shop started to thrive. He had to hire an employee to cope with the rush.

Amidst his repeated efforts to open his own shop, Zakaria had attempted to work abroad a few times, first in Vienna, later in the Netherlands (on a farm), and finally, in Norway (as a truck driver). The large income gap between Norway and Hungary allowed him to return to Hungary with significant savings. However, unfortunately, during his stay in Norway, his marriage broke up, and, no longer married to an EU citizen, it became legally impossible for him to continue to work there.

After his return to Budapest, he bought the first of his current shops on Narcisz street. *'I'm a very lucky chap!'* He exclaimed when recalling how the former Afghani shopkeeper was in need of cash and had sold the shop to him. His brother, a former guest worker in Dubai, joined him. *"At that time, there were only a few shops with ingredients from Asia and the Arabic countries"*, said Zakaria, explaining his business niche. Since then, he has opened a restaurant, a laundry shop, and a barber shop on the same street, and a buffet in another part of the city. His family members have come over from Pakistan to help with his businesses. He also employs several young refugees to help them start their lives in Hungary. In the past few years, food from his kitchen has fed hundreds of Indian temporary workers who are employed at large industrial plants near Budapest, thus further expanding his business profile and business revenue.

Zakaria has become a well-known character in his locality with a flourishing business: he organizes an annual cultural and food festival that attracts visitors from around the city. The local municipality recently made him an honorary citizen of the district. Despite his economic success, his legal status is still in limbo. The second renewal of his subsidiary protection was recently rejected. Moreover, his several citizenship applications have failed so far, keeping him in constant distress and anxiety.

Zakaria took an active role in shaping his agency regarding his future and trajectory of integration in Hungary. He started learning Hungarian, moved to the capital city to seek opportunities, and actively reached out for help to other co-ethnics, using regional belonging to establish contacts. His agency in looking for employment reached its full potential via horizontal networks, small acts of help and solidarity among other migrants, refugees, and people who, like Zakaria, were seeking opportunities in a new socioeconomic environment characterized by a hostile integration regime, as introduced at the beginning of this article. This type of agency is characterized by constant searching for points of access and opportunities. Success is usually temporary, punctuated by periods of crisis, loss, and setbacks. This active agency relies on an ability to constantly reinvent oneself, thus reacting to the rigid structure and denied access. In this context, self-reliance is crucial; it is at the core of migrant agency, but seeking partnerships with others in a similar situation is indispensable. Due to his active agency, continuous efforts, and inventive steps, Zakaria's process of embedding has evolved at a remarkable pace despite the negative structural context and occasional setbacks. However, his unregularized legal status "cancels out" his achievements in the social embedding process since it is the solid basis on which other agencies and navigation strategies are ultimately built.

4.2.2. Maria

Maria, a 23-year-old Ukrainian, came to Poland five years ago (in 2016). She started her occupational path here with *"hard physical work"*; cleaning. Currently, she is the owner of prospering massage studios and an active Instagrammer. She spoke about her career, involving decision-making processes and consistency in achieving goals: *"I've always dreamed of opening a massage studio. (. . .) First, I earned money for my first courses and started learning. I started getting my first clients. I slowly developed my customer base, which helped me open my own small massage room and then a large massage studio"*. Answering the question of what is behind its success, Maria mentioned the crucial role of her efforts, commitment, and strength, including her determination and strategic planning for the future. She admitted: *"to anyone who [would] open [a company], I can say—be prepared for it because it is some stress, [takes some] nerves . . . it is a fact. Without this, nothing will happen"*.

A significant role in Maria's story was played by her husband, who strongly supported her with the various formalities related to running a business in Poland (his status as resident helped her open the business) and emotionally. She remembers her beginnings as a young migrant entrepreneur; however, she has normalized the challenges she encountered: *"I have experienced ups and downs, ups and downs (. . .), and there were various situations, probably like in every migrant entrepreneur's life"*. According to Maria, what helped her develop the company was primarily her knowledge, skills, and professionalism, which

her clients appreciate. At the same time, Maria emphasized that acquiring clients required struggle—and a lot of patience and time—“*Poles don't always trust specialists when they hear they are Ukrainian or Belarusian*”, which is one form of discrimination resulting from the anti-migrant discourse in Poland. As a result, Maria's first clients were people from the migrant community. Furthermore, the community built by Maria virtually on Instagram supported her after she took a break from the profession due to her pregnancy and the birth of a child: “*I didn't work for almost a year and a half. Customers came back right away, and friends and everyone were very supportive, mostly Russian-speaking [ones]. My blog helped me a lot*”.

Maria's attitude is representative of that of young migrants in the labor market in Poland who build their occupational paths (both as entrepreneurs and employees) based on individual traits (such as resourcefulness, creativity, courage, and drive), personal networks, and the wider community, rarely using institutional forms of support. Summing up her career, Maria said: “*I'm stubborn in life in general, and it has helped me a lot because I keep going to the end, to victory*”. When asked about her career plans, she boldly replied: “*As of today, my ambitions are very high. (. . .) I have a dream to open my next business in Berlin. Time will tell. The plans are big; in Poland, I checked how [the business] works, and now I want more*”.

Maria's story demonstrates her “conscious” and developed agency resulting from the belief that she has a decisive impact on her own trajectory. She constantly strategized, engaged in long-term planning, and initiated different activities (e.g., gained new qualifications, created an account on Instagram, and built a strong network of customers), leading to gradual changes in her life. She was not discouraged when things did not go her way, which confirms her capacity to endure adversity and stay focused on goal accomplishment through implementing a well-thought-out plan. Despite her young age, she had mobilized her individual predisposition and sociocultural capital, including communication skills, networking, the ability to plan strategically, management, inventiveness, risk tolerance, and entrepreneurship to create and manage her own business proactively. The migrant community also became a significant source of support that helped Maria spread her wings and fulfill her professional aspirations. Drawing on valuable lessons based on her experience, Maria could make bold plans to develop her business in a different cultural context.

4.3. Aspirational Agency in the Context of Mental Health and Well-Being

The structural challenges associated with pursuing education, being recognized for one's qualifications, or finding a job that matches one's interests and aspirations can impact mental health, especially when combined with other factors such as earlier experiences of trauma. In terms of career and mental health, stay-at-home mothers are in a particularly precarious situation as they often feel isolated and have difficulty (re-)entering the labor market after a break of several years. In Poland (esp. in larger cities), NGOs organize workshops or meetings for migrants, including migrant women, to help them find jobs, and offer various forms of psychological help, including psychotherapy and self-help groups.

Shukrona

Shukrona, a twenty-nine-year-old refugee from Tajikistan, has lived in Poland for three years (since 2018) with her husband and three-year-old daughter. Before migrating, she graduated in journalism and studied psychology in Russia. She worked on television financed by the Tajik opposition, hosting a news program. Because of her opposition activities, Shukrona and her journalist husband experienced political harassment, and their lives were put in danger. She admitted: “*when I was pregnant, and they started threatening our baby, I couldn't take it anymore. (. . .) It was a tough time for me because I didn't feel safe in my country (. . .), so we decided to leave to create opportunities for ourselves and our daughter*”. The journey of Shukrona's family to Poland lasted as long as a month due to numerous deportations from Belarus to Russia. During this time, Shukrona was pregnant, which made it more demanding. Because of having to flee her homeland and the accumulated stress, at the beginning of their stay in Poland, Shukrona experienced depressive episodes:

“For some time, we lived in a refugee center where there was a lot of noise, there were various conversations between refugees and a lot of stress. When we stopped living there, I slept all day. I didn’t want to get up because I had finally found myself in a safe place without bad emotions. No one told me what I had to do, like ‘go to breakfast at 8 o’clock’. After two weeks, I started to get up somehow and started to recover”.

During the time of the interview, Shukrona was focused on raising her daughter, with whom she spends most of her time. After a few years of taking a professional break, she would like to return to the labor market. At the same time, she was very concerned that she would not be able to find a job in line with her interests and qualifications where she would have development opportunities: *“I’m looking for [a job], but I’m afraid it won’t be the job I want, that I won’t like it. I can’t imagine getting up in the morning and going to a job you don’t want and don’t like”.* Shukrona emphasized how important professional activity is for her well-being: *“I want to be financially independent for [the sake of] my psycho-emotional state. It is important for a woman”.*

The prolonged period without a job badly affected Shukrona’s mental health. She feels a lot of uncertainty about her career path and has lost her enthusiasm and motivation to engage in extra-family activities. While fulfilled as a wife and mother, she misses other activities. Shukrona’s husband understands this need very well and supports her return to the labor market by initiating her participation in various meetings. She talked about the empowering effect of one of the workshops in which she had participated: *“Recently, I had a nice weekend, without my daughter, without my husband, without my family . . . such a meeting. I really enjoyed it. I felt like I was on a trip [holiday]. I thanked my husband several times; he signed me up; I didn’t want to go because recently I had no motivation to do anything. (. . .) It seems I’ve lost my way. I don’t know where to go or what to do. I’m glad I went to this workshop. I heard there [they told me]: ‘you are so energetic, how active you are!’ It turned out that I needed such support”.*

The stress Shukrona has experienced over the past few years has harmed her mental and physical health. She has psychosomatic symptoms and severe back pain, which are related to the complex emotions she feels. For self-care, Shukrona eagerly reads the stories of women who are a source of strength and inspiration: *“I watch or read biographies of strong women, I watch various interviews with women who have experienced many things, I think I look for answers to my questions in their stories because they also had such [a difficult] time, they survived, they made it all right, I’m looking for motivational support”.* Although she did not mention it explicitly, she referred a lot to the idea of sisterhood: *“I think it’s very important to find your own community, and I’m sure I have mine. I have a club where I can go with other mums; it’s girls who always give support”.*

In addition to an informal support network, an important source of help for Shukrona is the psychotherapy she attends. However, as she emphasized, the psychological help system in Poland is not prepared for working with intercultural clients, which is a major barrier to the effectiveness of the therapy: *“I have meetings with a psychologist, but I miss many things. She doesn’t know what culture I was brought up in or what my outlook on life is. It’s a different culture, a different tradition, a different country, and it often [seems] like it’s me who is conducting the therapy, not her. (. . .) Various NGOs, they say: ‘The psychologist speaks Russian, and that’s it; it’ll be good for you,’ but that’s not enough”.*

Shukrona would like to continue her psychology studies in the future—*“I” want to finish what I started in Moscow.”* Her psychological interests and unsatisfactory personal experiences related to the quality of psychological support offered to migrants have significantly impacted Shukrona’s career plans: *“I want to open a therapy office for women. Sometimes I think I’m a feminist. For example, I was very motivated by the Women’s Strike.⁶ I like it when women fight for themselves and their rights. Recently, I have seen through the example of my friends—mothers, but also pregnant women—that many of them need it. That’s why I want to open a psychological [help] center and then a foundation where there will be a lot of psychological support and various therapies for women, although men also need them. And I want to make it intercultural”.* Shukrona is at a point in her life when she is looking for further professional development after this was interrupted by the need to flee Tajikistan.

Fear of the future casts a shadow over Shukrona's day-to-day life. However, her story demonstrates that this does not paralyze her in the present nor stifle her ability to make plans that remain open. She displays a "reactive" agency that she can use depending on the decisions she has to make, the context, and the people around her. At the same time, Shukrona's story shows how mental health difficulties that emerged as a consequence of the need to flee to her home country, the exhausting journey to Poland, the traumatic stay at the reception center, and an abrupt break in her professional career, can significantly limit taking matters into one's own hands, and how important it is in such situations to receive support. Shukrona found this in her family (a supportive husband and beloved daughter), in the informal women's groups that have given her faith in a better tomorrow, and, to some extent, in the psychological help offered by one of the NGOs. All these factors have mitigated the harmful effects of traumatic migration memories. They have also supported her with her current difficulties in the labor market, as it turned out to be impossible to continue working as a journalist due to the lack of recognition of her diploma and the language barrier. Shukrona is still experiencing a lot of self-doubt but is constantly working on her self-esteem and has not given up on her dreams. Shukrona's story demonstrates the crucial role of mental health in implementing one's life plans and the limits of professional psychological help tailored to the needs of people with a migration or refugee background. What motivates Shukrona in the context of further professional plans is a desire to improve her and her family's situation and possibly positively impact the lives of other migrant women struggling with similar problems.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The five case studies included in the article illuminate various individual strategies in the migration-hostile environments of Hungary and Poland that involve the evolution of the agencies of migrant youth. Although our interviewees narrated different stories from two sociopolitical contexts, including several local contexts, they speak to specific patterns of agency. We can identify various features and dimensions of migrant agencies in a CEE context impacted by hindering circumstances. In the following paragraphs, we give an account of these patterns and features.

5.1. Limited Agency

Throughout the cases we have presented, we saw that despite (or more exactly, *due to*) the hostile national contexts, certain forms of agency essential for social embedding on a local scale *do* evolve with the help of local "positive environments and actors" (NGOs and actors who help individuals to navigate mainstream attitudes in society). Nevertheless, these agencies remained limited in their scope and impact due to the constraints of the broader environment (the "immigration regime", specific policies meant to strengthen integration (in Poland), the lack of such policies (in Hungary), the general anti-immigration attitude of society, racialized discourses, etc.). This was particularly visible in Zakaria's case, whose uncertain legal status kept him in limbo despite the many steps he had taken to become integrated into Hungary; his individual agency was limited by powerful, structural constraints.

5.2. Agency as a Scalar Concept

The interviews that emerged from our empirical work indicate, in both countries, that the agency of migrant youth is a non-binary concept. This means that a relevant question associated with social embedding is not if someone *has* agency but how much and how it *plays out* in daily social interactions. The latter issue we considered to be a guiding question in our analysis. In the individual case studies presented in this paper, the evolution of agencies underwent different phases and stages, between minimal agency (as a negative ideal-type) to maximum agency (desirable full agency, equivalent to that of citizens in terms of access, entitlements, and social abilities), clearly making it a scalar concept. It also needs to be added that these individual processes of changing/transforming agencies

happen through non-linear multidirectional processes that involve moving back and forth, progressing, and regressing.

Zakaria's access to the labor market inside and outside Hungary was increased through his marriage to a Hungarian. He gradually built up his financial resources and, through his horizontal networks, managed to set up and run his own business. However, a change in marital status (divorce) narrowed his opportunities and scope of agency to the extent that his reapplication for a residence permit was rejected despite his flourishing business, wide social network, and the recognition of his "successful" embedding by the local government. The scalar character of agency is also visible in Shukrona's story. In her case, the expression of agency was contextual (and, therefore, nuanced and dynamic), highly dependent on her state of mental health and the circumstances she was in, with particular emphasis on the people who surrounded her and on whose support she could count. In terms of Shukrona's agency, the support of her husband played a huge role, along with the strength she received from her daughter, supportive relationships and informal support from other women, and psychological help from an NGO. Social relations and psychotherapy helped Shukrona rebuild her self-confidence and plan her educational and professional future. Shukrona is in a continuous process of regaining and strengthening her agency.

5.3. *Individual vs. Collective Agency*

Initially, we spoke about individualized forms of agency, resonating with the general observation that individuals in migrant-hostile environments such as Hungary and Poland are left to their own devices, and not much help (or no help at all) is provided on the national institutional level. Further, even support at the local scale is highly fragmented, and collective help is scarce. However, we also captured instances when individual agency is supplemented with collective action.

What seems to be individual agency at first sight (the cases of Boyko and Maria)—since the narratives speak about individual efforts and successes or failures—at a closer look, reveals the significant role of various social networks or capitals.

In the case of Boyko and his brother, family played an important role in developing their agencies through strategic steps (for instance, in calculated action related to education and employment). Mobility decisions and complex social maneuvering took place via the synchronized efforts of a single unit, which is the circle of close relatives, i.e., the nuclear family.

Family can also play a significant role "remotely", helping with further mobility and migrant strategies. James' middle-class family supported him in his country of origin to mobilize financial resources (selling his flat in Egypt and sending the money to Hungary) and to establish himself in Hungary (buying a flat), thus indirectly supporting him to establish his legal status, which involves specific financial requirements.

5.4. *Leveraging Temporality and Timing: A Form of Social Capital That Enables Agency*

The kind of strategic agency or social maneuvering in a transnational space described above involves short-term and long-term planning. Important decisions choreographed between family members or steps taken alone by individuals in the correct sequence and at the right time seem crucial. The recurrence of the relevance of such careful planning in different migration narratives drew our attention to the importance of *temporality* in mobility decisions related to navigation in the difficult contexts of the host countries. Both types of planning (short- and long-term) seem to be important, with direct consequences for the trajectory of the embedding process. Significantly, long-term planning turns out to be a type of skill or capital (in a Bourdieusian sense) that is closely linked to middle-class lifestyles and dispositions shaped at earlier stages of life in countries of origin. Those who were exposed to such lifestyles are more likely to reproduce such patterns of social maneuvering in the new context than their less fortunate peers who had never had the chance to acquire such skills.

The significance of *temporality* indicates the importance of the right sequence of action, having sufficient information about the former, and reflection on this (knowing when to (re)enter education, when to take an exam, how to apply for a job, and when, when to change careers, when to make a geographical move—just to identify a few strategic decisions whose timing was crucial, as we learned from our interviewees).

In other words, the right understanding of time (that is, a socially accepted and constructive way of interacting with it) and a thorough understanding of social rhythms (which action should follow which to achieve specific social goals) are important forms of knowledge in themselves.

Maria's story shows how she used her various capitals (mainly social and cultural) to build her career consistently. In her example, we see how the ability to navigate the vagaries of entrepreneurship in a "foreign" country (which involved building a personal brand on social media, a portfolio, and thus a network of clients, thereby creating trust not only among the migrant community but also among the local population) led to an improvement in her situation. Maria's agency was manifested primarily through the sequential planning of steps to success. Based on her accumulated experience and the development of her capital (including financial capital), Maria decided that "the time had come" for the further development of her business; hence, she planned to expand to another European country. Defining far-reaching goals for a completely new sociocultural context can be interpreted as a further manifestation of Maria's self-efficiency.

5.5. Other Sources and Forms of Capital in the Service of Agency

Beyond the very important capital related to timing and navigation, we identified several other types of capital which contributed to the development of migrant agencies. Economic capital is the most obvious of these, but since many of our interviewees come from vulnerable socioeconomic contexts, their agencies stem from somewhere else. It is often cultural capital and social networks which emerge as major sources of migrant agency. As James' example showed, his disposition to improve his prior education and knowledge (from before his migration) bestowed him with the "right type" of attitude and reaction to the challenging environment in Hungary. Along the same lines, Boyko and Vlad pursued their studies despite economic hardship, not questioning the value of education, and trusting it would lead to a good job. Thus, we argue that their agency is instrumental, meaning they mobilize capitals strategically to achieve long-term goals.

Migrant youth typically lack social capital in the country of arrival. However, with the length of stay, human relations and networks emerge, often among members of the same language group (e.g., in Hungary, among speakers of Hindi, Urdu, and Afghani) or on the basis of regional belonging. In some of these cases, social networks and community contacts serve as an important source of agency—this specific type of capital is called community capital in the literature that builds on the Bourdesian theory of capital.

Maria used migrant community capital (especially from the Russian-speaking community) to start her business enterprise in Poland; in the Hungarian context, Zakaria relied on the help of people from the same region to open his first shop in Budapest to obtain his first kitchen equipment for the restaurant, and to obtain a personal loan to start his enterprise, which proves how crucial horizontal networks among people in a similar situation (and from the same region) can be at decisive moments of embedding processes.

In parallel with the above-described language and region-based community capital, another type of social capital seems to have been present in the lives of our interviewees: this is "positive local environments", referring to small but important landscapes populated with local pro-migrant NGOs, grassroots initiatives, and helping individuals. Their help at critical moments (on arrival, while looking for help, when starting a business, looking for a job, or learning the local language) cannot be emphasized enough. For many of our interviewees, they represented, especially in the initial period, the only personal contact with local society; the only opportunity to become acquainted with the local population; the only opportunity to obtain essential information required to become acquainted with

the new environment; and the only contact points through which work, housing, and education could be accessed. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the supporting role of these positive micro-environments when accounting for various types of migrant agencies in the macro-contexts of Hungary and Poland.

6. Closing Remarks

In this article, we apply a broad understanding of agency and analyze interviews with migrant youth (from non-EU countries) living in Poland and Hungary and identify diverse forms and enactments of their agency. Describing five case studies in detail, we walk our readers through the complex process of the evolution of migrant agencies in hostile sociopolitical environments. We describe the major characteristics of these agencies as we learned about them during our field interviews. The cases from the two countries that are introduced complement each other, but since local contexts may vary within the broader context of “hostility”, any systematic comparison between Poland and Hungary would lack real grounds. Instead, we speak about types and patterns of agency (as a scalar concept, instrumental, evolving, and aspirational) that can be identified among migrants in CEE countries. On the one hand, these forms of agency depend on individual characteristics, such as the ability to make long-term plans, determination, self-reliance, etc. On the other hand, we also underline the significance of “positive local environments” in the multidirectional and multilayered processes of migrant embedding. As we note at several points in this article, individual agencies ultimately manifest themselves in a collective manner (with the help of community capital, as an alternative form of social capital, or via family, as a migration strategy and source of capital clearly described in migration studies literature). Migrant agencies in helpful micro-environments often result in phases of success during the embedding process. However, the hostile legal environment for immigration (and its manifestation in individual legal statuses) and related structural barriers (access to the labor market, education, social benefits, etc.) greatly limit the evolution of migrant agencies in the national contexts of Hungary and Poland.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Characteristics of the Samples in Hungary and Poland.

Participants (16–30)	Country of Origin	Methods and Number of Participants	Research Period
HuP1 ² Young migrants in vulnerable situations	Hungarian sample		
	Nigeria, Egypt, Syria, Ghana, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Turkey, Iran, Uganda, Pakistan	34 IDIs	January 2021–January 2022
PIP1 ³	Polish sample		
	Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Chechnya, Turkey, Sierra Leone, Brazil	40 IDIs (22–F, 18–M)	June 2021–January 2022
HuP2 ⁴ Young migrants with positive integration experiences	Hungarian sample		
	Nigeria, Ghana, Eritrea, South Sudan, Egypt, Afghanistan, Syria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Serbia, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Ecuador	11 (3–F, 8–M)	January 2021–January 2022
PIP2 ⁵	Polish sample		
	Ukraine, Belarus	11 IDIs (9–F, 2–M)	January–February 2022 ¹

¹ All parts of the study were completed before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, ² Participants in Hungary, living in vulnerable conditions, ³ Participants in Poland, living in vulnerable conditions, ⁴ Participants in Hungary, with positive experiences of integration, ⁵ Participants in Poland, with positive experiences of integration.

Notes

- ¹ Excluding forced migrants from Ukraine, who, in Poland and Hungary, are now dealt with under special legislation and are granted temporary protection status. This status is different from regular international protection as it is granted collectively.
- ² In 2018s, 72% of Poles were against accepting asylum seekers fleeing the war zone in the Middle East (CBOS 2018).
- ³ All parts of the study were completed before Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.
- ⁴ Germany, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
- ⁵ We followed ethical standards regarding researching young migrants in vulnerable conditions (Happ 2021). After collecting informed consent from participants, we audio-recorded the interviews if interviewees agreed to this. Some interviews were conducted online (in the case of Hungary, the majority) due to the COVID-19 restrictions and some were conducted on site. Collected data were coded thematically for the analysis (among other themes) of the challenges young migrants face in the integration process and their ways of coping.
- ⁶ The Women's Strikes (Polish: *Strajk Kobiet*) were anti-government demonstrations and protests in Poland (2020–2021) in reaction to a ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal that tightened the law on abortion in Poland.

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