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Migrant and refugee women from former USSR countries at the Crossroads of Sociopolitical Crises, Russian War in Ukraine and Intersectional State Violence

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Abstract

Women from former USSR countries with migration histories who arrived in Poland in recent years have faced complex challenges resulting from the recent poly-crises in the Eastern European region. This empirical article, based on 39 in-depth narrative interviews with Belarusian, Chechen, Russian and Ukrainian migrant and refugee women, hears and retells their narratives of fleeing, migration, trauma and marginalisation. Particularly, it shows the diverse experiences of the multiple wounds related to war, intersectional state violence, disadvantage and deskilling in the labour market and the complex processes of precarization. However, whilst it uncovers the accumulation of risks and precarity, it also documents how women regain strength and agency in decisions and life strategies, especially in the context of intersectional state violence experienced transnationally. It concludes that despite multiple and complex adversities, migrant and refugee women retain their subjectivity, whilst the (transnational) sisterhood – women's support in recovering and shaping livelihood strategies – plays a crucial role in such processes.

Keywords: intersectional violence, state violence, migratised women from former USSR countries in Poland, poly-crises

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Introduction

Women from former USSR countries with migration histories who arrived in Poland in recent years have been faced with multiple and often overlapping situations of crises – the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the humanitarian crisis at the Belarusian border and sociopolitical upheavals in their home countries. They have also occupied and navigated an unclear, fragmented, overly bureaucratic and often hostile migration policy landscape in Poland (Adamczyk 2021; Łodziński, Szonert 2023), adding an additional layer to the challenges faced. However, these women's lives and experiences, especially during the crises, often remain hidden (Christou, Kofman 2022), and even when they reach the public domain, dominant rhetoric obscures them from the autonomy, subjectivities and broader complexities relating to the histories of their countries of origin, their mobilities and their intersectional positionality – temporal, spatial and biographical (Christou, Michail 2019). To counteract such 'big' silences and obscurities, a research question has emerged – what challenges did migrant and refugee women from former USSR states residing in Poland face in recent situations of crisis, and how did they navigate/manage/respond to these challenges? Thematic analysis of the rich qualitative data from 39 qualitative interviews with Belarusian, Chechen, Russian and Ukrainian migratised women allowed us, in turn, to identify multiple themes, of which the experiences of intersectional state violence has been amongst the most prominent, and became a focus of this article.

The article is structured as follows: It first provides a background to the participants' migratory journeys and positions them within 'gendered geographies of power', transnational, temporal and biographical spaces intersected with multiple social categories of difference (that of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality, religion, etc.), which migratised women occupy, and which shape their lived experiences (Mahler, Pessar 2001). It then introduces the concept of intersectional violence, which serves as an overarching lens for analysis as it allows the capturing of complexities and subtleties of lived experience. After briefly discussing methods of data collection and analysis, the empirical part of the article then uncovers diverse experiences of the multiple wounds related to war, violence, disadvantage and deskilling in the labour market and the complex processes of precarisation. However, whilst it shows the accumulation of risks and precarity, it also documents how women regain strength and agency in decisions and life strategies in the context of intersectional state violence experienced transnationally. Finally, it demonstrates that despite multiple and complex adversities, migrant and refugee women retain their subjectivity, whilst the (transnational) sisterhood – women's support in recovering and shaping livelihood strategies – plays a crucial role in such processes. The article concludes with broader reflections concerning the centrality of intersectional state violence in migratised women's lives and mobility patterns.

At the Crossroads of Sociopolitical Crises, War and Violence

To understand the experiences of intersectional state violence experienced by women from former USSR countries with mobility histories, it is crucial first to explore sociopolitical, spatial, and temporal contexts—to map out the multiple and often overlapping crises occurring in transnational spaces they have faced across their migratory journeys.

The Eastern European region, from which the participants in this study originated, has a long and violent history of Soviet control, repression and imperialist rule. Whilst the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the fall of communism and the sovereignty of many of its former republics, it did not mean the end of Russian imperialist policy. On the contrary, Russia did not withstand its domination in many states, such as Belarus and Chechnya, which also remained orientated towards their close socio-economic and political relations with Kreml (Boćkowski 2020; Izbiańska 2019). Crucially, the (gender) regimes in Belarus and Chechnya, similarly as in Russia, are authoritarian, where:

> free speech and free association are restricted (…), there is less implementation of the rule of law (…) [whilst] [f]or gender relations, the authoritarian variety permits fewer freedoms concerning intimacy, reproduction and sexuality […]; it is more violent than other public varieties, in the relation between the state and citizen, and in the higher level of militarisation and propensity to go to war than neoliberal and especially social democratic regimes' (Walby 2023: 5).

Ukraine is another former soviet state that Russia considers crucial in ensuring its dominance in Eastern Europe, especially in light of the growing presence of the United States in this region (Izbiańska 2019). Whilst in the early years of independence Ukraine maintained its political and economic links with Russia, its gradual turn/orientation towards democratic Western Europe resulted in the Orange Revolution of 2005 and the Maidan Uprising of 2013. In response, Russia first invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014 and, in February 2022, started a full-scale war, which generated masses of refugees. In the first few months, around 7.4 million Ukrainians crossed the Polish borders, whilst Poland became the largest hub for hosting and relocating those fleeing the Russian aggression (UNHCR 2022).

Chechens and Belarusians have also opposed authoritarian regimes in their home countries. Two Chechen wars in the 90s and 2000s resulted in the very first waves of refugees arriving in Poland since it regained its sovereignty from Russian domination (Boćkowski 2020). In turn, 2020–21 saw the biggest anti-government protests in the history of Belarus, to which terror, police brutality and mass detentions were exercised by the state (Human Rights Watch, 2021), and, similarly as in Chechnya's case, led to mass refuge amongst the government oppositionists, many of whom sought safety in Poland. Alongside the above sociopolitical unrest and upheavals in the region, yet another humanitarian crisis has been unfolding at the Belarusian-Polish

borders; since 2021, Lukashenko's regime had been organising transfer points for those seeking asylum in Europe in response to the EU sanctions imposed on the Belarusian government (Palecka 2023).

Heikkilä and Mustaniemi-Laakso (2023) have described these contemporary, ongoing, and often overlapping crises in terms of a continuum while a crisification of human (migratised) lives as embedded in legal, political, and societal processes that shape responses to them in different, unequal ways. This undoubtedly has been the case in the Polish migration policy/politics context, where depending on the perceived deservingness of migratised bodies, their reception and political decisions of assigning (or not) legitimacy and support significantly differed (Laurent, Thevenin 2024). We could thus observe 'strikingly different border regimes' in Poland, as Ukrainians fleeing the Russian aggression 'were offered fast border checks and supportive infrastructure, as well as a warm welcome' whilst '[t]hose attempting to cross the border from Belarus into Poland saw brutal blockades, the racialisation of non-European refugees and rapid border militarisation' (Zessin-Jurek 2023: 101–102). It also needs to be noted that the latter practices have preceded the ongoing humanitarian crisis at the Belarusian border; for example, in relation to Chechen refugees facing the 'closed-door' policy for over a decade. Yet these practices have remained hidden from the public eye and debate (Szczepanik 2018). In this sense, Poland, like in the case of broader trends observed in Europe and the US, has continued to (re)produce a racialised/ethnicised gendered order of discrimination and exclusion of undesirable migratised groups (Laurent, Thevenin 2024).

Moreover, Poland has long lacked a comprehensive and clear migration policy regarding its key long-term goals and directions (Duszczyk, Kaczmarczyk 2022; Łodziński, Szonert 2023). It has also failed to incorporate principles of equality in the labour market and society, ensure migrants' fair access to goods and services, promote their social participation, and establish fair rules for granting status and legalising residence (Lesisńska, Duszczyk 2023). Instead, the country's migration policy landscape has been long caught between competing principles of 'migration openness' (based upon its need for foreign labour) and' fortress' (embedded in concerns for internal and external security). Overall, however, it has been rather hostile, underpinned by anti-immigration rhetoric (Krzyżanowska, Krzyżanowski 2018) and governmental unwillingness to ensure human rights, meet the needs and address challenges faced by its migratised populations (Adamczyk 2021; Łodziński, Szonert 2023).

Conceptualising intersectional violence

As widely documented across the field of gender and migration research, women with mobility histories experience violence across their migration journeys – in countries of origin, during transit and at destination(s) countries (Sahraoui, Freedman

2022). Such a continuum of violence has been generally theorised as gender-based violence [GBV], understood 'as all forms of violence—physical, sexual, psychological, economic—directed against a person because of that person's sex, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity' (Freedman et al. 2022: 5) and situated within an intersectional perspective 'as a form of critical inquiry and praxi' (Collins 2017: 1461). Intersectionality has thus been widely adopted as a research perspective to GBV experiences, constituting a theoretical lens for multiple systems of power and oppression (based on social divisions and identity characteristics such as gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age etc.) that interact and unequally shape the experiences and livelihoods of people differently positioned within 'the matrix of domination' in society (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989). Freedman et al. (2022) also point towards context-specific broader processes (political, societal, legal – such as those discussed in the previous section and relating to, e.g. anti-immigration rhetoric, hostile policy landscapes and overly bureaucratic and othering migration legal systems) that allocate people into unequal social positionings. In other words, intersectionality is as concerned with interlocking systems of oppression as it is with the power relations that (re)produce such systems. However, as Collins (2017) points out, power relations should not be reduced to a 'catchphrase' but situated as central to violence – especially in relation to the ever-present and routinised yet normalised violence of the state, its key agents and institutions.

Consequently, rather than gender-based violence, we should consider intersectional violence as a better navigational tool for analysing all dimensions of women's mobilities (Piscitelli, Lowenkron 2015), as these inevitably remain ingrained in unequal (transnational) fields of power in which such mobilities take place. In such a sense, intersectional violence constitutes a structuring principle affecting diverse aspects of migrant women's lives and remains inevitably linked with ethnic/racial and gender orders of each country and political-social disputes dictating what is or is not violence and who the potential victims are (Piscitelli, Lowenkron 2015; Ribero et al. 2024; Walby 2023). Even the sociopolitical crises and upheavals remain constructed differently, determining who is a legitimate (good, legal) as opposed to a fraudulent (bad, illegal – or more broadly a symbolic threat) migratised person with dire consequences for their rights, legal status and access to resources and social protection (Laurent, Thevenin 2022). Such distinctions, in turn, should be treated as acts of state violence themselves (as, for example, in the case of the 'closed door' policy towards Chechens escaping their conflict-ridden country or the humanitarian crisis at the Belarusian border where violent pushbacks are used to deter asylum seekers from the Global South to enter Poland/EU).

It also needs to be highlighted that violence manifests itself in various dimensions, not only in the family and domesticity – a sphere recognised by the dominant public and political discourses but also at the community and state levels (Ribero et al. 2024). In the latter case, it also spans the continuum and encompasses different, often

overlapping, forms – material (physical, structural; Farmer 2004), symbolic (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2004) and slow violence (Nixon 2011; all cited in Gren et al. 2024). Moreover, as Walby (2023) further argues, violence permeates regimes of inequality, with variations depending on the type of modern society, with authoritarian regimes (Russia, Belarus, Chechnya) being the least democratic and more violent, coercive, oppressive and overall unequal across various axis of social categories of difference (such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation etc.) than neoliberal (Poland) and social democratic (e.g. Scandinavian states) gender regimes. However, capturing instances of symbolic violence is also crucial – as it points towards not only acts of violence but also gendered and racialised constructions of migrants and consequently their 'rightful, thus subordinate' place in the social hierarchy of the hosting states (McDowell 2009). In this sense, women with mobility histories are positioned within 'gendered geographies of power', transnational (as opposed to global and national), temporal and biographical spaces that intersect with multiple social categories of difference (that of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality, religion in particular), which they occupy, and which shape their lived experiences (Mahler, Pessar 2001). 'Gendered geographies' theorise gender as operating simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales (the body, the family, the state) and transnationally, whilst 'social location' refers to 'persons' positions within power hierarchies created through historical, political, economic, geographic, kinship-based, and other socially stratifying factors' (gender as the main category of difference, but other categories are simultaneously at play; Mahler, Pessar 2001: 445–446). What is crucial is that being positioned within such power hierarchies and processes of hierarchisation and categorisation (Anthias 2001) affect multiple dimensions of identity, which in turn 'shape, discipline, and position people and the ways they think and act' (Mahler, Pessar 2001: 446), thus exposing the symbolic dimension of intersectional violence once more.

This article is thus committed to uncovering multidimensional manifestations of state-sanctioned/state-level intersectional violence in the lives of migrant and refugee women from former USSR countries who arrived in Poland in recent years. However, it also remains inscribed in the strand of gender and migration research that calls for a 'wider awareness of the *autonomy* and *subjectivities* of women migrants' (Christou, Kofman 2022: 13). It thus captures and highlights participants' narratives of agency, resilience and practices of (everyday) resistance against various instances of intersectional state violence, how they (re)gain strength, and what strategies and meanings they adopt in their ongoing struggle for dignified lives and better futures amidst the poly-crises in the Eastern European region.

Methods and data

This empirical article is based upon qualitative research conducted as part of the international project GEN-MIGRA, "Gender, mobilities and migration during and post-COVID-19 pandemic – vulnerability, resilience and renewal[2]," aiming to examine vulnerabilities and risks experienced by women involved in international mobility and their agency and resilience strategies during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Russian aggression in Ukraine and its consequences expanded research goals to include the impact of this significant crisis in the region on migratised women in Poland. Additionally, it provided a fertile ground for comparing the experiences and reception of women fleeing different conflicts in the region and seeking safety in Poland and the European Union. Enhanced ethical standards (for research with potentially vulnerable populations) were adopted, and the project was granted relevant ethical approval.

The research team conducted 39 interviews with migrant and refugee women who arrived in Poland in recent years (1 to 10) and were from Belarus (10), Chechnya (2), Russia (8), and Ukraine (19 in total, of which 10 came before and 9 after the Russian invasion). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants with enormous help from various non-governmental and public migrant organisations. The sample aimed to reflect the broader Eastern European migrant groups residing in Poland in recent years, as in 2019, out of 2.1 million foreign-born nationals, the top nationalities included Ukrainians (1.35 million), Belarusians (105,404) and Russians (37,030; GUS, 2020b). Additionally, the sociopolitical contexts in the countries of origin (authoritarian regimes, Russian domination) and limited research and visibility of Belarusians, Russians and Chechens in the Polish policy, research and public contexts constituted another factor for inclusion and comparison alongside the significantly larger, more visible and researched Ukrainian population. Women recruited were between 20 and 72 years old and of different family status, educational backgrounds and legal status (refugees, migrants, but also those escaping rigid classifications where various motivations were simultaneously at play), thus demonstrating at least some heterogeneity across the sample (see Table 1 – Participants' background information).

Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, in-depth, and conversation-like (Rubin, Rubin 1995), lasting between 2 to 3 hours and focused on various dimensions of participants' lives up to the time of the fieldwork (between August 2023 and March 2024). In other words, the interviews aimed to capture a broad structure of biographical knowledge across participants' migratory experiences and the meaning

[2] GEN-MIGRA project was funded by the National Science Center, Poland, and Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social Sciences and Humanities—Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post-Pandemic World (No-2021/03/Y/HS6/00159; ID52702). It is a collaboration between four countries: Poland, Brazil, the UK, and Germany (see www.genmigra.org for more details). This article is based on data collected in Poland.

Table 1.

Participants' background information

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Profession/Education	Employment in Poland	Children	Marital status
Valentyna	45	Ukraine	lawyer	cook and carer; now intercultural assistant	1	married
Oksana		Ukraine	Master's degree in business and management	admin work; now intercultural assistant	2	married
Ruslana	37	Ukraine		cook in primary school; vegetable packing	2	married
Larysa	37	Ukraine	English teacher	intercultural assistant	1	married
Anastasia	30	Ukraine	Accounting (equivalent of unfinished bachelor's degree)	bottle factory, nanny, cleaner; now NGO case worker	1	married
Alina	36	Ukraine	road engineer	cleaner, massagist	2	married
Valeria	30	Ukraine	higher education/administration/ economics/pedagogy	prev. carer, cleaner; then pedagogue/ therapist in an NGO	2	married
Daryna	71	Ukraine	retired/worked in telecommunication	carer/cleaner	2	single
Yelysaveta	56	Ukraine	public sector worker (welfare)	carer/cleaner	1	divorced
Ivanna	46	Ukraine	small business owner	carer/cleaner	1	married
Asma	55	Chechnya	self-taught tailor	tailor	3	married
Deshi	24	Chechnya	unemployed	cleaner - cash in hand	2	married
Elza	46	Russia	psychologist	unemployed	0	married
Jana	46	Russia	public relations	unemployed - seeking	2	married
Elena	38	Russia	law graduate; business owner	business co-owner	1	married
Olya	44	Russia	school teacher	school teacher	2	married
Sofiya	32	Russia	programmer	programmer	1	married
Eva	22	Russia	graduated from high school	student	0	single
Margarita	36	Russia	athlete	business owner	0	engaged
Maria	32	Russia	public relations	unemployed	0	married

Olga	27	Belarus	doctor	nanny, now doctor's assistant	0	married
Lucia	32	Belarus	postgraduate degree Belarusian teacher	languages tutor; event organiser; activist (prev. student, nanny, admin worker)	0	single
Alesia	41	Belarus	engineer	unemployed; carer (prev. teacher's assistant)	1	married
Polina	45	Belarus	degree in economics (worked briefly in a bank	unemployed; activist	2	married
Mira	43	Belarus	massagist	nursery nurse; now tester of programming	3	married
Volha	29	Belarus	cosmetologist (degree in Poland)	works in a packaging company/prev. in a recruitment agency	0	partner
Milena	59	Belarus	small business owner – selling handmade products	casual work	2 grand-children	married
Tamara	65	Belarus	food factory worker	cooking channel	2	single
Nadezhda		Belarus	editor of children's books	unemployed	3	married
Yadviga		Belarus	musician	unemployed	1	married
Khrystyna	61	Ukrainian refugee	Ukrainian/Russian language teacher; then trading on the local market (clothes)	unemployed/carer	2	married
Sasha	22	Ukrainian refugee	Bachelor's degree in 3d design	unemployed - seeking	0	single
Marta	38	Ukrainian refugee	energy engineer; worked as a secretary in a company	cleaner/bar staff	1	single
Helena	49	Ukrainian refugee	Choir conductor	cleaner in a hotel	7	widow
Inna	36	Ukrainian refugee	well-educated (3 degrees), managerial jobs	unemployed	1	married
Klara	72	Ukrainian refugee	engineer mechanic	retired	2 adults	widow
Zoya	20	Ukrainian refugee	university education/printing	printing company - manual labour	0	single
Bozhena	71	Ukrainian refugee	nurse	retired	2	married
Olena	34	Ukrainian refugee	Ukrainian teacher	cleaner in a hotel		

attached to them. They also allowed interviewees to reflect on the key turning points in their lives, including the impact and consequences of poly-crises for them and their kinship networks. In this sense, women in this study have become the first narrators and interpreters of their experience (Dwyer 2017), which was also reflected in the abductive analytical process, as it started with the bottom-up analysis before bringing in the key concepts, ideas and theories from the field of gender and migration (top-up analysis and consequent moderate theorising level of analysis; Coffey, Atkinson 1996; Fereday, Muir-Cochrane 2006). One of the key themes identified in participants' narratives has encompassed multiple dimensions of intersectional state violence across their migratory trajectories, which have become a focus of this article – inscribed in the gender and migration research strand that embraces an understanding of mobilities as gendered phenomena and is committed to documenting gender disaggregated findings on experiences of migratised women (Christou, Koffman 2022).

Forced migration as transnational and transferred state violence

Wars, like the Russian aggression in Ukraine, bring death, mass rapes used for centuries as war weapons (Kimmel 2015), absolute humiliation, hunger, fear, disease, filth, and unimaginable, inhumane, overwhelming suffering; wars take away homes, dreams, and futures; they rip families apart, deeply traumatise and leave scars that never completely heal. Participants from Ukraine, those mothers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, aunts, and friends, often accompanied by and protecting children, the elderly, and the disabled, have experienced and witnessed such inhumane terrors of war before they fled their homeland. Yet, it also needs to be highlighted that migratised women do not only escape the violence of the external states (wars, colonisation, empire) but often also of their own states, especially when they live under authoritarian and/or patriarchal gender regimes. In such countries, as a prominent feminist scholar Sylvia Walby (2023) argues, state violence, intimidation, surveillance, repression, threats, police brutality, torture and coercion constitute a fabric of the everyday, whilst patriarchal structures limit, if not eradicate, the rights and freedom of women and girls.

In many cases, as the excerpts below will also show, those forcefully exiled women experience a somewhat existential loss of life in terms of violent de-rootedness from their homes, families, and communities, from their own past, present, and futures, from what they have known, achieved, dreamed about and hoped for. Moreover, they are often forced to live split and heartbroken lives, especially if they leave (and usually they do) their loved ones behind, some of whom they may never meet again. In this sense, such state violence (of the external state but also – one's own) lasts and is felt much longer, more severely, and perhaps never entirely disappears from exiled women's lives:

I never... I was pregnant, and I hoped to stay in Kyiv for the rest of my life because I had everything; I had my whole life there, and I didn't want to undertake any journeys. I didn't want to go to Western Europe to work; I just wanted to stay home in Ukraine, but when the Russians came, they came so severely that they murdered and raped even 3-year-old girls; you can imagine this from Bucha. They were like animals, like beats, and absolutely crazy; they looked like they were on drugs, maybe they were under the influence of something – I don't know how it is possible to be so cruel and so... how can you?!... – if you see the car running with a family, who is escaping, how can you shoot all the family (Inna, Ukrainian, 36, pregnant at the time of the Russian invasion, separated from her husband who has been in the army, supported by and supporting her mother)

My entire family supported the political movement of the leader Sergei Tsikhanousky. (…) I had to leave my home and my family in 2020, right after my daughter was detained. I left very quickly with my two grandchildren. My husband has stayed in Belarus to support our daughter and her husband. We were a normal, friendly family; we spent all our free time together, we raised our children together, we helped our daughter, our daughter helped us, and then it all ended… We haven't seen each other for 4 years. It's like we are at the frontline: two of us became prisoners, one is alone on the front line, and the three of us are in exile (Milena, 59, Belarusian, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, wife)

My sister's husband was killed and that's where it all started. I don't want to talk about all of that... Well, yes, we escaped; we left my mother there and our son, who can't leave. He was in the army then and couldn't leave; they wouldn't let him. My brother, sisters, the whole family, the whole clan stayed. We live in a clan, and my whole family is there (Asma, Chechen, 55, mother of 3, hasn't seen her firstborn son and the rest of her family/clan for over 10 years).

It's just that I (pause)... my soul has been divided into two parts – one is here with my (four) children, and the other is left in Ukraine because it's all mine. (…). I ran away from the war with my children, but the war didn't just run away from me (…). My two sons are on the front line. They can move a little further away from the first line, maybe five kilometres back, to rest – how can you call it rest? But, and always when... And they do shifts – 3 days there, maybe 2 days here, maybe 3 if it works out and back again; I always wait until the three days are over – this is also my life divided, and I always ask: "When you come back, write to me, you can just put a dot and send it, and then I will know that you are alive." (Helena, 49, Ukrainian, widow, mother of 7 with two sons fighting a war and a young adult daughter who did not want to leave Ukraine).

Our participants also talked extensively about their experiences of ongoing (embodied) fears, trauma and feelings of a lack of safety, exposing yet another dire and long-lasting consequence of the wars and repressions (the somatisation of suffering). The nature of such fears has varied from intense bodily reactions to various triggers to fear for one's own and/or their loved ones' safety. In many cases, fear of authoritarian regimes also meant limited, fractured and not fulfilling contact with transnational

families – as the (invisible) hand of the state was felt as always present, surveillant, and ready to harm. This was especially visible amongst Belarusian participants, the survivors of the recent anti-governmental protests who had to flee their country to escape persecution, but similar fears (of the state, for the loved ones left behind) were also present amongst Chechen and Russian participants – expressed e.g. via their concern of interviews being anonymous, so their respective governments would not be able to identify and harm them and their families.

> When we moved to this village (in Poland), we lived by the Fire Department and these alarms… You know, two weeks passed, I think, and it's 3 a.m. and this alarm is screaming, my children, not even a second had passed, they immediately ran to me, the youngest one screaming: "Mom, I beg you, we don't have to go anywhere, it's like in Ukraine?!" and that's when this landlady came and said: "Don't worry about it, I'm sorry I didn't say it earlier, it's the Fire Department." What the Fire Department did was cancel these alarms altogether, and if something like an accident happened, it was only by phone or something. Because we weren't the only family in this village, there were a lot (of us) … And my son is also afraid of planes. All Ukrainians to this day, I really can say that because I am like that – when a plane is flying, you immediately look at the sky. And it was such black humour... that Ukrainians can be seen abroad because when a plane is flying, a Ukrainian immediately looks at the sky. (Helena, 49, Ukrainian refugee)

> And to this day, I feel threatened by my country. If someone calls me on telegram or Viber about the situation in Belarus, I have trouble sleeping and have anxiety. Even though everything is fine, I am safe here, there is still this state of anxiety and fear. Of course, we're not fully settled here yet, but it's a different fear: that someone is following you. (Mira, 43, Belarusian)

> In the beginning, we were even afraid to write or call. My daughter was interrogated many times and asked where her brother and mother were. We didn't want to endanger her; she knew we were here, we knew they were there, and at the beginning, we had very little contact. After a year, they obtained a visa and came to Poland. (Tamara, 65, Belarusian)

In this sense, state violence in our participants' lives becomes transnational and transfers across borders. We can also see how the continuum of violence that gender and migration scholars such as Sahraoui and Freedman (2022) have theorised is even more extensive than previously argued. Not only does the state violence of the hosting country often become a part of migratised women's lives (as the following section will demonstrate), but the violence they escaped from does not cease to exist. On the contrary, it may manifest itself in such additional/complex dimensions as feelings of existential loss of life and/or leading split lives where longing and fear for loved ones causes pain and unimaginable suffering. Moreover, the fear of the (authoritarian) state's forces still being present in our participants' lives and having a real potential

to harm them and/or their loved ones across the transnational spaces remains and continues to profoundly affect their safety, well-being and even possibility to keep close relations with their families.

Intersecting material and symbolic state violence in Poland

As highlighted earlier, the continuum of crisification in the Eastern European region has been embedded in political, legal and societal processes that shape responses to crises in different and unequal ways (Heikkilä, Mustaniemi-Laakso 2023). Such processes of hierarchisation and categorisation (Anthias 2001) constitute a backbone of intersectional state violence that has been a structuring principle affecting diverse aspects of our participants' lives, as ethnic/racial and gender orders and socio-political disputes shape what is or is not violence and who the potential victims are (Piscitelli, Lowenkron, 2015; Ribero et al. 2024; Walby 2023). As such, recognising the victimhood/vulnerability of Ukrainians fleeing the war and the legitimacy of this conflict (Laurent, Thevenin 2024; Zessin Jurek 2022) in Poland and Europe was not the case for other participants and was particularly visible in their struggles (also during yet another crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic) to obtain legal status, various support (information, legal or psychological help etc.), and access social protection, services and resources, as excerpts below demonstrate:

> [W]e had big problems; we couldn't get a right to stay for a long time, and it took us almost a year. We even had to hire someone to help with these documents because they kept causing problems for us for a long time. We didn't go anywhere else for help because where? Everything is clear with the Ukrainians, the whole program. And Belarusians? We fumbled with everything ourselves. (Nadezhda, Belarusian, fled to Poland in 2020)

> It's easier for Ukrainians; no one cared about us (Chechens), we didn't have access to the hospitals, and nothing was normal. For them, there's everything, all the support. For us, there was nothing. (Asma, 55, Chechen, fled to Poland in 2013)

Women whose reasons for migration could be positioned as (somewhat) voluntary, such as Ukrainian participants who arrived in Poland before the war, also shared feelings of being treated differently (less favourably/unequally) by the state. They recalled various, multiple and extensive experiences of no access to information, support and social protection (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when, for example, they lost jobs and were barely getting by) and institutional hostility/discrimination/reluctance (e.g. when dealing with immigration offices and trying to legalise their residency status):

> That beginning of COVID was the most terrible (..) – Did you get any help from state institutions? – No, 500+ for a child. Nothing more. Now, they have made it all a bit easier.

> Because we were officially employed, I had a kind of maternity leave; I received some money, and we were not entitled to benefits at that time. We reported to ZUS as low-income to get some additional help, but we got a refusal, and that's it because no – you are not entitled. But that's Polish law. (...) We were simply in such a shitty situation, we tried to be optimistic and not think that some country is oppressing people from other countries, migrants. Maybe that also caused it, me not having citizenship, or maybe there was just such a time when COVID was difficult for everyone. (Anastasia, 30, Ukrainian; at the time of the pandemic lost a job in a factory due to her pregnancy and was doing various casual jobs)

> [T]hat year I wasn't waiting online for my place in the immigration office… we had this deadline... to sort it out [apply for a second temporary stay during the COVID-19 pandemic during the lockdown]. And I know you will not have this positive decision without even one piece of paper. Well, because I know that there are such situations. And I thought to myself that I'd send everything by post. And so I sent it all and wrote. Because I know that if you don't write to the office, no one will contact you. I wrote. Once a month, I wrote: what's up? How's it going? I want to know the case number, and I want to know when it will be [reviewed]. They wrote back that you should wait because it can take three to six months and so on. Later, I called, and they told me that I had a new inspector, and it was like that; then I called in June, and in July, we received positive decisions for me and the children (Alina, 36, Ukrainian, cleaner/massagist).

Resultantly, such examples demonstrate the routinised/normalised character of intersectional (state) violence (Collins 2017), inscribed in the overall hostile migration policy landscape in Poland; more of a 'migration fortress' (Łodziński, Szonert 2023), in which migratised populations continue to be constructed and treated like 'the other' (by the state and its key agents and institutions) despite, in most cases, of their white background (see also Sime et al. 2022 on the othering processes of white European migrants, including Poles, in the UK, for comparison).

Another significant example of state violence was further reported by Russian participants who, in connection with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, reported being denied the extension of their right to stay in Poland (formal rejection from the country), whilst the institutional decisions were based upon undisclosed information from the state's Internal Security Agency:

> I submitted the documents, and then the war started. In mid-April, I received information that my documents were classified. I'd never encountered anything like this, so I started asking everyone what it was about; what was it? (...) Sure. Well okay. Well, they probably didn't like my red passport (Olya, 44, Russian, teacher)

> (T)here was no conversation with the immigration office; I received answers that the issue of state security was not discretionary, that nothing could be done, and that if the Internal Security Agency said so, it was over, and I had to pack my bags. (Margarita, 37, Russian, athlete)

According to participants, they were profiled based on their nationality and arbitrarily classified as a threat to the country's safety. The case was reported to the media, and the Human Rights Ombudsman and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights were investigating it (Bąk 2022) as a potentially systematic violation of human rights and freedoms experienced by Russian citizens who legally resided in Poland. More broadly, as prominent legal scholars argue, the Polish legal system incorporates, by design, a complex conflict between protecting state security and human rights (Nowak 2018: 37). For example, in the past, the war on terrorism resulted in foreigners in Poland becoming 'prime suspects' and quickly constructed as a threat to the country's security whilst the state and its key agents and institutions were 'inclined to expel them in an arbitrary manner' (Wojnowska-Radzińska 2017: 59). In such legal order, symbolic and material (state) violence thus interlock and produce stigmatisation and different forms of exclusions, including formal rejection of foreigners from the hosting state's territory.

Migratised women in this study have not only experienced a multitude of structural violences discussed above but also complex (symbolic) processes of deskilling and precarization. By entering the hosting country's multiple systems of power and oppression, they have been differently situated within 'the matrix of domination' (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989). This was particularly visible in their labour market positioning and experiences. Most of the participants were working below their qualifications and usually in gendered 3-D jobs (Dirty, Demeaning, Difficult) or, if they resisted and had a more secure socio-economic situation (e.g. via their husband's high-level employment), they were struggling to access white collar jobs, suspecting discrimination at play (due to being a migrant or even an 'enemy' as in case of Russian participants). Many participants in 3-D employment also reported working in a grey area, which meant little job security (felt the hardest during the COVID-19 pandemic), exploitation and limited access to social security (Slany, Ślusarczyk 2008). Additionally, Ukrainian refugees have been living under conditions of continuous uncertainty concerning their right to stay in Poland due to the temporary nature of the emergency law passed after the outbreak of the war (Krzaklewska et al. forthcoming; Ustawa z dnia 12 marca 2022 r.…):

> The Polish women would rather not work than work for such [a low] salary. I actually rarely meet Polish women [working as domestic workers]. And maybe also from the side that employers are looking for Ukrainian women. (Daryna, 71, Ukrainian, domestic worker, grey area)

> Well, first of all, I wrote in my CV this additional information that I have a company and that I am a Polish citizen. But I must always emphasise it because there is my name and surname at the top, and you can see I am Russian from it. (Jana, 46, Russian, IT, unemployed)

> And we still don't know whether it [the right to stay) will be extended or not. And it's just... and at work (hotel cleaning), we had to say that we only work until June. This lady is

concerned because 80% of Ukrainians work there. When July comes, at least half of them will leave in one day, I think, more or less… (Helena, Ukrainian refugee, choir conductor by education/work, cleaner in Poland, 49)

Additional layers of complexity at the intersection of nationality, age, disability, and socioeconomic situation (single vs married, more vs less access to capitals, etc.) have further diversified processes of precarization. For example, in the case of Ukrainian refugees, where the state, even though more welcoming than towards other refugee groups (as demonstrated earlier), has continued its take on integration via the (low-level, gendered) labour entrapping of migratised women in this stratum of the labour market and with little if no regard for the elderly, retired, disabled and/or (single) women with caring responsibilities.

I was cleaning all day long; I didn't even stay overnight in my own house; I stayed with a friend from work closer to these apartments – she told me to stay because we were closer to them so that we could clean all the apartments. Because of this, at the very beginning, I missed these important moments of adaptation and learning the language somehow (Olena, 34, higher education – teacher, works as a cleaner in Poland, Ukrainian refugee)

Since my arrival, I have often heard this sentence: Go to work. I would love to go to work somewhere, but I can't. I can't keep a job but try to earn as much as possible. Now we are sitting in this hotel and sewing; it's a small project: hats, socks, masks, just to keep going. (Bozhena, Ukrainian refugee, retired nurse, 71)

Yes, there was no contact (in a cleaning job) that I didn't learn the language there at all, and I didn't speak there, I forgot a lot... And there was also that they changed something, I was on a subcontract, and there this owner, this director, and this company did not want to say something, something they did... well... and I lost that job. And this job was... I live on X street and it was on Y street, well, just 15 minutes by tram, very comfortable. Because I worked there until 10 at night and I didn't want to be there, keep working, because my child is also waiting for me to come. (Marta, 38, Ukrainian refugee, single mother of a boy aged 12)

Consequently, the qualifications/skills/competencies of migratised women continue to be often not recognised in Poland (also legally). Instead, they are constructed like an essential yet expandable labour force (Pandey et al. 2021) and usually considered for employment understood as particularly suitable for migratised women (McDowell 2009) – cleaning, domestic work and/or hospitality/service sector, akin to trends observed over the last two decades (see Kindler 2015; Slany, Ślusarczyk 2008). The above processes have become hyper-visible with the influx of Ukrainian refugees, whose integration via low-level gendered work was actively promoted by the Polish state and its key agents and institutions and could be understood as (state-sanctioned) symbolic violence aimed to strengthen dominant gender and ethnic order

further. Moreover, those unable (even temporarily) to integrate via such work have been left out to face perhaps even more acute precarities, as precariousness 'is not distributed equally and is thus inherently political [whilst] [s]ome are more exposed to precariousness than others along intersecting axes of inequality' (Freedman et al. 2022: 18).

Agency, solidarity and resistance

Despite the overarching presence of violence in the lives of migratised women from former USSR countries, their narratives were not only that of suffering, victimhood and despair. On the contrary, the influences of structural forces were strongly intertwined with participants' agency, resistance and (re)gaining strength in decisions and life strategies. The remaining part of the article will thus document the role of (transnational) sisterhood – women's mutual support in recovering and shaping livelihood strategies in their ongoing struggles for dignified lives and better futures amidst the poly-crises in the Eastern European region.

Undoubtedly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which generated masses of war refugees, resulted in an unprecedented and perhaps one of the most significant political and societal mobilisations of help. It was defined as a 'carnival of solidarity' with Ukrainians (Graff 2022), as international, state, local, and individual levels of multidimensional (material and symbolic) support were provided immediately since the outbreak of the war (see, e.g. Fuszara 2022; Jarosz, Klaus 2023). Whilst a lot has been written about the enormous grassroots mobilisation of the Polish civic society, the role played by its migratised populations has been as vital, even though perhaps less recognised/discussed (see e.g. Czerska-Shaw et al. 2022). Crucially, all the women in this study were actively involved in supporting Ukrainian refugees, including those who fled the war themselves. Across the sample, they were providing multidimensional assistance by using various skills, knowledge and competencies, working, volunteering, advocating, organising and donating their time and resources:

> And I was working as a volunteer when Ukrainians came from the war [in the Chechen NGO], we gave them, we prepared food and gave them food there, yes (…). I wanted to help those; there were small children and pregnant women, and that's why I wanted to help. (Deshi, 25, Chechen, unemployed and barely getting by at the time of the outbreak of the war; waiting five years to receive a legal right to stay in Poland)

> My husband and I started collecting things, going to the store, collecting everything, helping out and so on. I signed up as a volunteer everywhere. I signed up as a psychologist [at a Ukrainian NGO] and as a translator at the Legal Aid Centre, and a few days a week, I worked night shifts at the housing centre where people went. In the beginning, I was still a translator at the legal centre one day a week between these nights. After a month

> or so, I got two job offers, one as a psychologist at the NGO (Elza, 44, Russian, psychologist, unemployed)

> [T]he one at Mickiewicz [statue] in Krakow, such protest actions… and from the beginning I simply looked at them, because I thought it was some kind of one-day action, that would end. Later, I noticed they were there every day because I was coming home from work and they were still standing there, and I approached them when they were singing the National Anthem of Ukraine. I approached them and was told I could join (…). Later, I started going there with my children. We also have a collection. It is officially registered. The money from this collection goes towards direct purchases for soldiers; it's sent to Ukraine. I'm not just talking about these vests because my sons got them; they're also backpacks, first aid kits, helmets, and shoes. The last thing we bought for my younger son was a drone because they needed it; they don't always have it in the army, and the army doesn't always take care of these needs so quickly. Not only Ukrainians and Belarusians go to these protests, but also Poles. (Helena, 49, Ukrainian refugee)

In this sense, we can see how the field of help was transnational as migratised women worked tirelessly alongside NGOs, state and international organisations, and institutions, which also gave them a sense of agency in the face of the ongoing war.

Solidarity with Ukraine was not the only dimension of participants' lives where we could observe how they actively and collectively shaped their livelihoods. On the contrary, other crises and agentic responses to these have also been widely discussed. Belarusian women in the sample, for example, were strongly engaged in (transnational) political activism and supported other Belarusians seeking refuge in Poland via well-developed networks of information and help:

> [A]nd I went home to vote at the beginning of August. Of course, even in my village, I went to the shop, stood there and handed out leaflets. I talked about other candidates because in such small villages and to grandmas and grandpas who do not use social networks, it is as if they only see what is on TV, and so I thought that I would spread the information to the residents of my village. I did not say: vote for this or that candidate, but I would tell them about the situation. My mother told me in the morning: "Where are you going? Why? Well, you have to be quiet". But I already understood that no! I will not be able to do that; I have already done it and arrived, printed these leaflets, and I am going.

> But there is a Belarusian community here with no one to care for and develop, and I want to do it. Now, I have returned to tutoring because it is easy for me to start quickly and earn money, and I have experience in this. I run my own business, I am self-employed, I pay reduced ZUS, and I earn money to support myself, but I also invest in my development, learn about our diaspora and how to receive grants and subsidies, and many other things. We founded an association, and two weeks ago, we got registered, and now we are on the way to transforming the old association into a new one with new board members (Lucia, 32, Polish and Belarusian language teacher; activist)

> When we arrived, Anna [Belarusian activist] gathered a lot of Belarusians who helped us materially; someone bought us some groceries, and some, for example, we just went to visit, and there were various conversations – such a good way of spending time, and that also helped a lot so that we simply did not fall into depression because it was such a supportive community. Also, for example, we could walk or go somewhere else outside Krakow with them. My husband and I got great support, so I am very grateful to the Belarusians because they did everything. We had a room, we had food and also a volunteer Anna found us a free Polish language course, from which we started learning Polish because it is a kind of essential thing because you will not find a good job if you do not speak Polish (Olga, 27, Belarusian doctor who fled the country with her husband after receiving prison sentences for actively participating in/organising the protests).

There was also a strong mobilisation amongst Russian participants who were denied their right to stay in Poland (as discussed in a previous section). Specifically, they self-organised with the help of social media and actively used legal means of a democratic state to highlight and combat their formal rejection from Poland, as the quote below shows:

> And I couldn't pack my bags, where would I go? I won't go back to Russia. So I simply started doing everything I could, and then with this [online] group [of Russians who received a negative decision regarding their right to stay in Poland], I asked all my friends [there], and I also spoke to journalists to make this problem public. I wrote to the city office again, and it turned out that I knew a lady there who deals with discrimination and inequality issues, who at the beginning also said: 'I don't know, we'll see what can be done'. And then, simply more and more people from Russia started saying the same thing, so they started saying no, that this was something bigger. And then I reported to the Ombudsman... (Margarita, 36, Russian, athlete)

The final yet equally prominent example of migratised women's (everyday) resistance, especially during crises, has been visible in the mutual multidimensional support of the old and newfound kinship networks. For example, surviving the fear, destabilisation, isolation, unpredictability and exacerbated precarities of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to our participants, was possible thanks to the reliance on their social infrastructure (also technologically mediated) and guided by the principle 'do ut des' (I give so you may give), as the excerpts below show:

> As for the part of my family with whom I live here in Poland, well, we had no problems asking for help, except that sometimes we were simply sad, so then we called either our parents or our friends. From time to time, we drank wine online with our friends, too (…). I mentioned that we weren't very sick; we had a cold and COVID almost after the pandemic. But I have friends I was helping; they were really sick, and I was buying food and bringing it to their door, and then they would pick it up. And we have a few friends like that. (Larysa, 37, Ukrainian)

> During the pandemic, we tried to support each other and always said, "Let's be positive." If something bad happens, everyone contacts everyone else, and we will look for solutions somehow because we have such a good, supportive family that is close (…). Everyone may be afraid of something, but they also try to share their support with others. (Volha, Belarusian).

Consequently, despite the overarching continuum of intersectional state violence experienced across their migratory journeys, migratised women from former USSR countries demonstrated a strong degree of agency and resistance. These were mainly manifested in the context of poly-crises in the region, especially in various forms of transnational mobilisation of solidarity (with other women) on the one hand and through the workings of the old and newfound (informal) kinship networks on the other.

Conclusion

Recent and often overlapping poly-crises in the Eastern European region had adversely influenced the lives of many migratised women from former USSR countries residing in Poland. Amid socio-political turmoil, the Russian war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, they have faced multiple manifestations of intersectional state violence across their migratory journeys. In many cases, authoritarian (gender) regimes (of Russia and/or their countries of origin) forced them to flee their homes and leave their families, communities and lives behind, whilst violence exercised by these regimes has been further transferred across borders. This was particularly visible in feelings of existential loss of life, leading split lives and limited or no ability to maintain relationships with their transnational families, especially in person. Many have also reported the experiences of trauma alongside the fear of authoritarian state violence being able to harm migratised women and/or their kinship networks across the transnational spaces.

Escaping the violence of authoritarian regimes and arriving in Poland, however, did not mean the end of state violence. On the contrary, migratised women have entered the nets of structural violences underpinning the hosting society – particularly visible in its ethnic/racial and gender orders and socio-political disputes, which have unequally shaped what is or is not violence and who deserving and non-deserving migrants in Poland are. Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed and treated more favourably than any other migratised population, which struggled with legalising their status, obtaining various support, and accessing social protection, services, and resources. In this sense, we could observe the normalised and routinised character of state violence as it continues to be embedded in the overall hostile and othering migration policy landscape in Poland. Finally, most participants have also experienced complex processes of deskilling and precarization, entrapping them in low-level

gendered sectors of the labour market. Such processes, in turn, can be understood as (state-sanctioned intersectional) symbolic violence aimed to maintain a dominant gender and ethnic order in which migratised women are 'the subordinate other', with unequal access to rights and privileges available to the dominant groups in the hosting society.

These multidimensional manifestations of state violence constituted a central part of the lives of migratised women from the former USSR countries caught up in the violent geo-political conflicts afflicting the region. Violence has been a structuring principle guiding their mobility patterns, livelihoods, well-being, and relationships with their transnational families, vulnerabilising and leading to the accumulation of risks and precarities unequally redistributed alongside intersecting axes of social categories of difference. However, it needs to be emphasised that migratised women have not been solely helpless victims of such intersectional state violence but instead exercised a strong degree of agency, autonomy and resilience. Not only were they engaged in a transnational field of help to Ukrainian refugees, but they were also involved in various forms of activism, self-mobilisation and everyday mutual solidarity of the old and newfound kinship networks.

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