Support Online: the Case of Russian-speaking Women's Online Network in Warsaw

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The purpose of this paper is to study the mechanisms of online networking and exchange of social support among members of a migrant virtual group of Russian-speaking women in Poland on Facebook. The research was based on content analysis and non-participant observation during two weeks in November and December 2019. I also had two online conversations with the moderator of the group based on a prepared list of questions. It appeared, that members of the group used networking to improve communication on a wide range of issues. Conversations available online provide insight on how migration determines daily issues and social life but also as a source of socially-reproducing precarity. Informality as a social model of inter-group relations prevails among members of the Russian-speaking community. Four main types of social support emerged from communication on the forum – informational, instrumental, emotional and community building. Russian-speaking women use Facebook group to share information, empower each other, boost self-esteem and find companionship. The findings allow to consider the role of the online group as a complementary mechanism for adaptation and improvement of well-being of migrants in Poland.

Keywords: migration, female, adaptation, social support, networking, migrant network, Facebook

Introduction

„I was the first who moved…. I had a visa, found work for two months, it was hell… I couldn't stand it, I cried…moved to the factory, people recommended me, with free housing and adequate payment …. I arranged documents for my husband ….. after a year we took our children here… Everything goes well now. Don't be afraid, it will not be easy at the beginning. Write to people you know, they will help. Good luck!"

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Such was the comment of one participant, made on Facebook group FB_Group_1[2] during a discussion on personal experiences regarding migration to Poland. The discussion was initiated, when one of the members wrote, that she felt stressed and uncertain about the decision to move to Poland, and asked for advise from others. This short statement shows that the post-migration network (Ryan, Mulholland 2014) has an important role when the migrant faces challenges in a new country (Dekker, Engbersen 2014). It becomes a resource of information, support and interpersonal contact (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 405).

As it appeared from the content on the Facebook group FB_Group_1, women face challenges in finding employment, renting a flat or sending their children to school. Although there are different migration strategies associated with family migration (Ryan 2007), education, high-skilled migration (Dolińska 2017; Ryan, Mulholland 2014) in each case the female migrant feels the need to reorganize her social network (Ryan, Mulholland 2014), to gain support and extend social relations. What seems to be important to explore, is with whom female migrants form such post-migration networks (Ryan, Mulholland 2014: 149), what mechanisms facilitate networking and what is the impact of the network on individual adaptation and life in a new environment.

The migrant network as a source for social support is associated with migrants' well-being (Djundeva, Ellwardt 2019: 4), it allows to maintain contacts and relations, overcome loneliness (Djundeva , Ellwardt 2019: 3) and a feeling of isolation, to improve self-esteem and self-confidence (Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe 2008). In the context of female migration, the sense of belonging, solidarity and mutual understanding (Binsahl, Shanton, Bosua 2015) is important to define core features of the women's networking.

Virtual communication establishes an infrastructure (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 405) to improve access to resources of the migrant network. As online solutions have dominated the communication sphere, online networking has become widely popular among migrants (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 402). Due to new technologies people join virtual groups on social media to share information, experience and maintain contact with each other. There are a few such groups on Facebook, which enable the networking of migrants currently based in Poland. Members of online networks (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 405) maintain informative weak ties (Granovetter 1973) and gain access to valuable resources (Ryan 2011) to facilitate day to day life in Poland.

In my research I decided to focus on women's online support groups, provided by female migrants in Warsaw. This creates an innovative approach in migration studies. I have selected one of the Russian-speaking women's migrant group on Facebook FB_Group_1, where participants discussed current issues regarding their everyday life in Poland. Content analysis was chosen to find out what topics women discuss,

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[2] To secure anonymity and confidentiality I did not use any personal data, also all real names of Facebook groups mentioned in this study have been changed.

what types of support they share. The study provides a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of online networking and social support among female migrants, allows to find out how virtual membership can contribute to adjustment to life in Poland, community building and self-agency processes among migrant women.

In the next section, I will briefly present an overview of the current situation in Poland in the context of migration trends and the growing number of migrants from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Thus I draw upon literature and theoretical concepts of social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 2001), social ties (Granovetter 1973) and social support (Walter 2016). Next I present the results of the study and examine what subjects Russian-speaking women discuss online and what types of social support – informational, instrumental, emotional or community building – appear within such conversations. In the concluding section I demonstrate how communication online within social groups such as Facebook can affect the adaptation of migrants in Poland and how virtual networking can improve access to network capital and unveils examples of emerging institutionalisation of the Russian-speaking community in Poland.

Literature review

In this paper I apply the gender related perspective in analyzing online networking (Brown, Broderick, Lee 2007) and online social support (Bambina 2007; Walter 2016) in the context of migration/ adaptation experience and community building of Russian-speaking female migrants in Poland.

Gender oriented perspective is widely described in migration studies, also in Poland (Grabowska-Lusinska, Jazwinska 2009; Praszałowicz 2008; Slany et al. 2009). Previous research presents analyses of differentiation in relation to lifestyle patterns among female and male immigrants in a new environment (Dolińska 2019; Slany et al. 2009), economic activity (Grabowska-Lusinska, Jazwinska 2009), the role of female migrants in specific sectors of the labour market (Fedyuk 2016; Kindler 2012; Krajewska 2012) and female migrants as entrepreneurs (Andrejuk 2015, 2018), issues of integration and family life (Iglicka, Gmaj, Bąbiak 2013). Settling in a new country, women can experience adaptation needs differently than men so they create female oriented support networks to help each other to cope with challenges in a new place (Kleinman 1978, Lynman 1985). Highly-skilled female migrants use networks to obtain individual goals and rebuild social circles (Ryan, Mulholland 2014). Other studies show that migration causes the renegotiation of gender roles and femininity, expresses self-reliance and abandoned male-centric attitude in lifestyle (Dolinska 2017, 2019). Research on the influence of new virtual communication technologies on migration and social ties of migrant networks has also appeared in studies (Dekker, Engbersen 2014; Erdem 2018; Komito 2011). Scholars suggest that communication via virtual platforms facilitates migration (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 412) and improves

adaptation in a new place (Erdem 2018: 77). Researchers found that females use social media to foster a "sense of belonging and connectivity" (Binsahl, Shanton, Bosua 2015). What I aimed to explore in the research was how and in which aspects of life in a new country female migrants rely on virtual social networks. Such knowledge allows to understand how women use weak ties to share social support and how networking online is related to the Russian-speaking migrant network.

In this study I apply the perspective proposed by Marta Kindler and Katarzyna Wójcikowska-Baniak on the social networks of Ukrainian migrants titled *"(Missing) Bridging Ties and Social Capital? The Creation and Reproduction of Migrants' Social Network Advantages: The Case of Ukrainian Migrants in Poland"* (Kindler, Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019). The authors analyze how extended ties created among co-nationals solidify the network but limit the perspective of social relations beyond its boundaries with representatives of the host society. I also use the framework proposed by Patricia Drentea and Jennifer L. Moren-Cross in their article titled *"Social capital and social support on the web: the case of an internet mother site".* The authors applied the gender perspective of social support and the role of a female "virtual community" as a "self-help" group, where the participants share information, write about their emotions and feelings, express support and understanding in reference to difficult and stressful experiences related to childbirth and motherhood (Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005). The authors found that the virtual network was an "empowering source of feminine space" where the members could mutually exchange emotional support, information and community protection to overcome stress.

Before presenting my own studies, I will refer to the literature on theoretical concepts which grounded my idea, such as concepts of social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 2001), online networking (Brown 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, Lampe 2008), social ties (Granovetter 1973) and social support (Bambina 2007).

Online networking and social capital

Migrants' social networking is defined as "interpersonal ties that link migrants, former migrants, and non migrants in origin and destination areas through the bonds of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin" (Massey 1998: 396). In the case of my study I am looking at intergroup relations developed and maintained online among the members of a group on Facebook.

Granovetter proposed the concept of strong and weak interpersonal ties maintained among members of the network (Granovetter 1973). As migration processes are extending and involve wider groups of people, interaction within migrants' networks is based rather on weak ties (Small 2017) which tend to be more informative but less intimate. Migrants' networks develop gradually, in relation to migration flows and establishing diasporas or migrants communities in the country of destination.

In the literature this process is defined after Massey as "cumulative causation" (Massey 1998: 45–46). The role of the migrants' network can be analyzed from two perspectives – firstly, its influence on the individual migration strategy and adaptation and secondly, its role in the functioning of the group as a whole within the receiving society. The first context of "beating the path" (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 402) explains how the potential migrant or newcomer overcomes challenges of migration and adaptation due to resources of the network and help from co-nationals already settled in a new place. The second perspective of analysis is about the empowerment of migrants as a group within the receiving society and is focused on exploring how the members of the network create informal and more formalized infrastructure to develop their self-sufficiency and self-advocacy.

The concept of social capital is widely described in theoretical literature. In the context of migrants' network analysis I have used the definitions of Bourdieu (1985) and Lin (2001). Bourdieu proposed to understand social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 248). As within the migrants' network members generate social capital due to extended mutual interactions, the understanding of social capital as "resources accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions" (Lin 2001: 24) seems to be applicable.

Within the migrants' network its members both generate social capital and derive from its resources – exchange information, seek for advice, encouragement and help, find companionship (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 405). The network can become an important source of social support for its members.

Why does the migrant rather seek for advice among co-nationals than representatives of the receiving society? Byrne proposed the concept of "similarity-attraction effect" (Byrne 1971; Kaptein et al. 2014: 343) and Dekker used the term of "community of interest" (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 403). Both theoretical concepts present the idea, that similar features increase a sense of belonging and also allow its members to define themselves in contrast to the dissimilar environment (Lönnqvist, Deters 2016: 113; Seder, Oishi 2009: 438). Similarity as a core element for networking can appear in its homogeneity. There are different features, that define the homogeneity of the group such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, education etc. (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Cook 2001: 415). If we look at a migrants' network, such features as nationality and language will play the major role as bonding elements and in defining membership. The other theoretical concept highlights the importance of common/similar experience as a bonding element for the network. In the case of migrants' networks we can admit that mutual understanding and willingness to help emerges from personal migration and adaptation experience.

The experience of migration, which creates mutual understanding of challenges and feelings, homesickness, the need to reconstitute some cultural models, approaches

141

to rebuild a social circle lost due migration – all these factors can benefit networking processes.

In sum, migrants tend to link into networks to improve individual capacity to meet adaptation needs. Networks emerge on the base of similar features – in the case of my research, such bonding elements were gender, language, and migration experience. One of the benefits of the network, is that it can enhance the development of the social capital of the migrants' community, which is used as a source for sharing social support, social advancement (Kindler, Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019) and successful adaptation of its members.

Networking can appear in different forms. But, as soon as new communication technologies entered our daily life, the Internet extended its role as a primary space for interaction among geographically and socially dispersed members of the migrants' network. Online social networking (Brown 2007: 12) can be understood as interaction among individuals on "social network sites (SNSs)" (Brown 2007: 12; Steinfield 2008: 434).

Studies of the role of social media for networking have been included into the field of migration studies (Dekker, Engbersen 2014; Hsiao, Dillahunt 2018). Migrants use social media platforms as a tool for social interaction (Komito, Bates 2011: 289) and create close groups to share information, references, seek for help, advice or find friends. Online space facilitates information-sharing which can positively affect the individual ability to fulfil adaptation needs. In the literature there are four categories of adaptation needs listed: settlement, financial, cultural and emotional (Hsiao, Dillahunt 2018: 70:8). Fulfilling them has an essential influence on well-being and daily life in a new environment.

Within digital tools migrants develop and maintain social ties. Using virtual platforms for the exchange of "streetwise" knowledge (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 406) on migration participants, regardless if they are active in the discussion or passive observers (Dekker describes this as a *latent ties* (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 404)) gain and cumulate information and contact which can be used any time. Focusing on user-generated content (Dekker, Engbersen 2014: 403) gives us inside knowledge of the mechanisms of online networking among immigrants and allows to explore how "the online communities" (Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005: 924) contribute to individual adaptation and community building processes in the real life.

Online social support

As it was mentioned above, the rapid development of communication technologies has influenced the mechanism of daily communication and maintaining contact among recipients, regardless of geographical location and time dimensions. Virtual platforms have also become a space for sharing social support (Walter 2016). Online

social support appears when the participants of a group exchange information, advice, self-help and awareness of the presence, solidarity and community in relation to a specific (stressfull/difficult) issue. Examples are given by research on the role of online social support in the case of cancer or other serious disease (Coulson, Aubeeluck, Buchanan 2007; Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005; Honga, Peña-Purcell, Orya 2012).
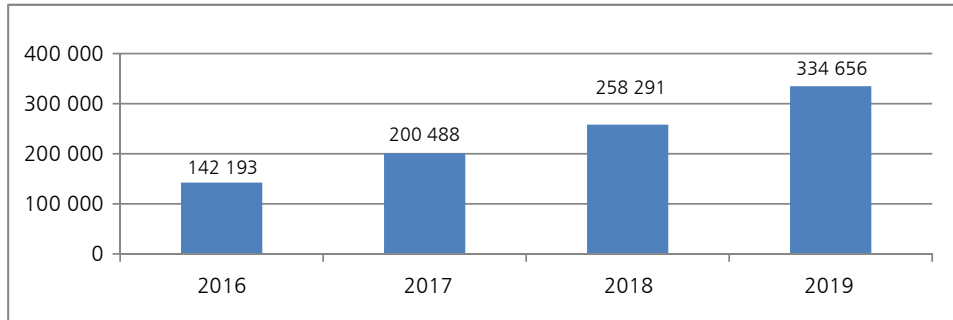
Online social support results from intensified interactions between members of social groups on virtual platforms. Five categories of social support such as informational, instrumental, material, emotional and community building can be observed (Walter 2016: 76–86). Informational support provides participants with advice, suggestions, which can be used to address the problem or to gain new and essential knowledge (Glanz, Rimer, Viswanath 2008; Malecki, Demaray 2003). Such type of support emerges in conversations when participants share personal experience and knowledge for "better understanding of the issue"(Walter 2016: 76). Instrumental support includes practical solutions and is task oriented (Malecki, Demaray 2003). Being recognized as "integral" (Walter 2016), it appears in examples of directing (material and behavioural) assistance to the person in need (Glanz 2008; Malecki, Demaray 2003: 233). The further category, material social support refers to all forms of charitable financial assistance or delivering goods to someone in the network and often takes the form of nonprofit fundraising initiatives (Walter 2016: 82). Emotional support appears when members discuss on forum the stressful and difficult situations they have faced. Such form of support ensures a feeling of security, sympathy, understanding and companionship (Walter 2016 : 85) and appeares to be essential for preserving psychological (social and emotional) well-being of the member of the network (Coulson 2005: 583; Walter 2016: 85). The last category of social support is community building which relies on expressing possession of common features or experience, and relies on a sense of solidarity. This form of support appears also in intensified interpersonal contacts, when members of the network initiate common events or meet each other. Community building provides resources for the emerging institutionalisation of the migrant network creating structure (hierarchy of managing communication, location, frequency of meetings) and symbolic attributes (logo, slogan, name ect.). The network, where members co-share social support has a positive impact both on individual level of self-agency and also strengthens the network as a whole.

Research context

Poland experiences a stable numerical growth of migrants from non-EU countries, who tend to settle in Poland obtaining temporary or permanent residence (Okólski, Wach 2020: 146), although in net migration emigration still prevails, some scholars claim that Poland is becoming an emerging country of immigration (Okólski 2010; Okólski, Wach 2020: 146).

Total number of foreigners with valid documents (permanent residence, temporary residence, residence permit for EU long-term resident) 2016–2019.

Source: Author's own calculation based on data from the Office For Foreigners 2016–2019 https://migracje. gov.pl/
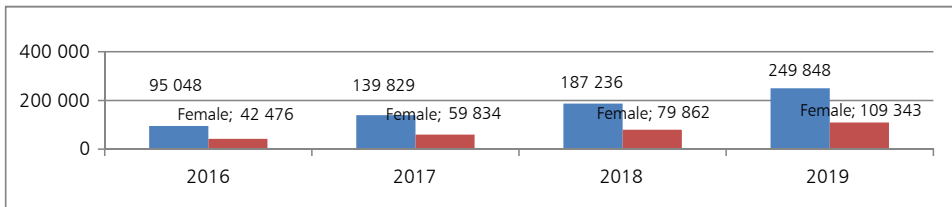
The demographic and economic situation determines that labour market and education are attractive areas for migrants to choose Poland. Political willingness in favour of economic migration also influences the scope and features of migration inflows. Scholarship programmes[1], benefits for the Poles' cards holders[2], simplification of employment procedures[3] make Poland a favourable destination for migration from East European neighbouring countries – Ukraine, Belarus or Russia.

Numerically, the predominant share of immigrants in Poland are Ukrainians (64% among the total number of migrants in 2019) (Dolińska 2017, 2019, Kindler, Fedyuk 2016), followed by migrants from Belarus. The third group, which will be essential for the current analysis are people coming from Russia.

Even though representatives of all the chosen countries create networks among co-nationals, there are also examples of inter-group initiatives that link people rather due to the fact of common migration experience, linguistic proximity and cultural models, which also reflect similarities in lifestyle, consumption habits or attitudes to social life. These factors extend the group of potential recipients beyond nationality or ethnic criteria. In Poland, due to long-term migration trends from Eastern European neighbour countries, some of the numerically largest are the so called "Russian-speaking" groups. Females constitute a significant group within co-nationals (43% Ukrainians, 44,5% Belarusians and 58,1% Russians). Data based on criteria of permanent and temporary residence permits only partially describes the female group. The real number of Russian-speaking migrants in Poland is significantly higher, especially if looking at data on circular migration, issued visas or employer's declarations on entrusting work to a foreigner. But for the purpose of the current research I excluded the data on circular migration as from the content analysis it appeared, that the target group of the selected Facebook group are women, who tend to settle permanently in Poland.

Total number of female migrants from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia among co-nationals with valid documents (permanent residence, temporary residence, residence permit for EU long-term resident) 2016–2019:

Source: Author's own calculation based on data from the Office For Foreigners 2016–2019 https://migracje.gov.pl/.

Although language is an essential criterion for bonding and networking processes, there is also a more specific, socially and culturally defined feature, that results from the common experience of post-soviet socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural transformation, defined in the literature as a reliance on informal social capital (Aliyev 2015:7). Following Aliyev, informality appears when the role of "networks, friends, kin members, arrangements and contacts" (Aliyev 2015:6) increases and is defined as a social norm. Informality patterns emerge within the Russian-speaking migrant networks infrastructure. There are different social and economic institutions directed at members of the community such as professional services, educational services, shops or community associations (Ejiogu 2018:247). Reliance on "svoi" ("ours") manifests itself in different aspects of daily life.

The group of women migrants from the three mentioned above countries is very diverse in terms of education, profession or labour activity and length of stay in Poland. According to data from the Office for Foreigners, in 2019 almost 82% of female migrants from Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian Federation with valid temporary and permanent residence permits were in the age range of 20–59 years old, where the largest group (67%) were women 20–39 years old[3]. Taking the age criterion into consideration it is possible to assume that female migrants are active participants both in the sector of education and the labour market. They are involved in all sectors from low-skilled jobs to narrow and expert specializations. Although it is impossible to provide an exact overview of migrant women labour activity in Poland, studies complied by different scholars (Andrejuk 2018; Kindler 2012; Kindler, Szulecka 2014; Kindler, Szulecka, Kordasiewicz 2016; Krajewska 2012; Krzystek 2007) note

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[3] According to data from the Office for Foreigners in 2019 among female migrants from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia with valid temporary, permanent stay permits and residence permits for EU long-term stay there were 60052 women in the age group 20–39 years old and 28756 women in the age group 40–59 years old. The total number of women holding the mentioned above valid residency documents was 108 049.

that migrant women with various skill levels find employment in rather less desirable and more precarious conditions (Ejiogu 2018) or work in so called "female zones" (Andrejuk 2018) such as care and domestic services, sales and customer services, beauty and gastronomy sectors. One of the indicators of the precarity of female migrants is the limited access to social security. In Poland, a majority of migrant women are not entitled to public insurance. The total number of female migrants reported to the retirement pension and social security insurance (Social Insurance Institution (ZUS)) in 2018 was 186 325, which constituted only 32,7% of the total number of migrants reported to ZUS. Among the group presented in this paper, the share of migrant women with public insurance was highest among citizens of the Russian Federation (49,9%). Among females from Ukraine it was 34,4% and from Belarus 25,2%[4]. However, further research is needed to verify the level of education of female migrants and how it relates to employment and the actual position on the labour market in Poland.

Networking mechanisms involve a diversified and spatially dispersed group of Russian-speaking females in Poland. Online communication allows to facilitate networking processes and maintain "connectivity" (Hepp, Bozdag, Suna 2012) and immediate exchange of information and support. Female migrants from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia develop exclusive virtual networks for information-sharing, mutual social support, solidarity and socialization, which also improve face-to-face or offline interactions and impact a sense of "groupness" (Adamson 2016) and community building.

Research design

For the purpose of this paper I conducted qualitative research based on content analysis and non-participant observation of conversations on the forum of one of the Russian-speaking female migrant groups on Facebook. To gain more detailed information I contacted one of the moderators twice, we corresponded on Facebook. Our correspondence was based on a list of questions.

There are a few such groups in Poland, which link people with different migration experience and duration of stay in Poland and provide members with information and support[5]. There are also a number of women's groups such as the one selected for the research FB_ Group_1, where there are currently more than 21 thousand members, FB_Group_2 with similar information-sharing and supportive profile, includes

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[4] Data presented in the report Foreigners in the Polish social security system – 2nd edition, Statistics and Actuary Forecasting Department Warsaw, https://www.zus.pl/documents/10182/2322024/Cudzoziem cy+w+polskim+systemie+ubezpiecze%C5%84+spo%C5%82ecznych_WYDANIE_2.pdf/1b8737fc-3cc5-8824-8f7b-109f787ad366, May 2019.

[5] There are also Russian-speaking groups on Facebook, which are focused on sharing commercial offers, services or job offers, such groups were not included in the analysis.

16 thousand members, FB_Group_3 dedicated to Russian-speaking mothers, where there are currently 12 thousand members. Within such groups members share the latest news about the situation in Poland, share references on specialists or places, have discussions on different topics or share personal stories and experience. Discussions on the forum are also a place where participants ask for help and support or find companionship for off-line communication.

I have selected the group FB_Group_1 as numerically one of the largest women's migrant groups, where there are currently more than 21 thousand members. The group intends to facilitate communication and information-sharing among Russian-speaking women but commercial offers, job offers, sales or exchange are banned. Such content can be published in thematic subgroups such as "FB_Group_1 work" to share job offers or "FB_Group_1 documents" to discuss issues related to the legalisation of stay in Poland.

One of the reasons to focus on the group was my own migration experience. I have been a member of the group for a couple of years, followed and gathered information useful to me. Following the discussions I became interested, how such mechanisms of online support influence the daily life of immigrants. To determine the role of social media in adaptation processes I decided to find out, what types of social support are shared most often among members of the group. I applied content analysis on a selected sample of posts and comments.

I worked with the QDA Minor computer program on a sample of randomly selected 115 initial posts followed by comments (in total 32 194 words) published during a week in November and one week of December 2019. Because traffic in the group is relatively high (there were 10–15 posts daily, followed by comments) it was difficult to check back if any other comments appeared at a later date. All the texts were published in Russian language and the analysis was done on the original version. I conducted coding based on two sets of categories, which were related to the research question – the thematic areas of the discussion and forms of social support, indicated within interactions.

As it was recently mentioned, women used the forum to share a varied range of issues concerning their life in Poland or specifically gender issues. I applied a division into eight thematic categories: health, child care, education, goods, offers/services, free time, administrative regulations, migration experience. To answer the question, concerning what forms of social support members of the group share among themselves, I applied four categories such as informational, instrumental, emotional and community building. Material support was not included into the analysis, as such kind of content is restricted according to regulations of the group.

Both indicators – the thematic areas of the discussions and forms of support expressed by the participants were checked for linkages in aim to clarify situations when women stay in contact and fulfil their needs within the network and do not seek relations beyond the group.

Results

"Gathering Russian-speaking women in Poland"

The group was created in 2016 as a platform for communication and exchange of information among women currently based in Warsaw, who had recently arrived or already stayed in Poland for a longer period of time. As one of the moderators described, the group was dedicated to all migrant women "*who are new in Warsaw and seek information and support or are long-term residents but experience the lack of communication in Russian*".

There is no criterion on the county of origin or nationality, the distinguishing feature of the group is the language – conversations are held in Russian. Although the group is homogenous in terms of gender and migration experience, it links a diversified group of women with different education, profession and labour activity both at the country of origin and in Poland. The members of the group have also different lengths of stay in Poland which results in different experience and attitudes toward migration and life in a new country.

As the group is one of the largest of such category in Poland, it partly reflects the current situation in terms of migration trends and numerical prevalence of migrant communities from ex-Soviet counties in Poland. Moreover, due to the experience of the dominance of the soviet regime, particularly in Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, Russian language is not only a tool for communication, but reflects the mutual understanding of cultural models and lifestyle. In need to communicate, women join the group despite geographical location and lack of previous contact.

FB_Group_1 is an online support group, where all discussions are female oriented. To preserve the goals of the group and the safety of its members access to the group is limited. Membership and activity in the group are regulated by the board of administrators and moderators. They provide control over membership – each person, who declares to join should be accepted. Moreover, they take control and censor the content on the forum – each initial post is verified before it becomes visible on forum, moreover moderators follow the discussions on comments and can delete or close the conversation. Each participant is obliged to follow the rules, otherwise she can be blocked or requested to leave the group. Such forms of moderation are needed to ensure that the group fulfils its role and the content contains essential and reliable information.

Currently there are more than 21 thousand followers in the group. Conversations include initial posts and discussions on comments. Women correspond on the forum on a daily basis and carry out discussions on a wide range of topics related to both adaptation needs and gender-related issues. As the administrator of the group mentioned: "*the most painful topic for the members in the group is adaptation… Girls share stories about their lives, ask for help… A lot of them do not know Polish*

language that's why they seek help among Russian speaking community especially looking for doctors, discussing topics from legalization to entrepreneurship".

As it was mentioned previously, online groups provide a place for interaction among dispersed female migrants and facilitate the exchange of information, advice, support and enhance a sense of companionship (Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005: 924; Miyata 2002: 520). Following the discussions of participants of the sample group presented, we can observe how issues related to migration and adaptation needs appear and are solved in a women-centred environment. Writing on the forum and commenting each others posts they create a space for trustful and emotionally-oriented discussion based on individual experience.

The group attracts members because it ensures a "women self-help circle" (Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005: 938), based on mutual features of migration experience, language and cultural models. The Facebook group facilitates communication, as despite the lack of direct contact, different availability and spatial dispersion, participants can chat and share information immediately, get back to the specific strand later or follow the discussions passively. Women express their own experience and personal attitude to life in Poland, discuss issues related to the education of their children, share references to places they visit, specialists or any other topics related to the day to day life.

To answer the question concerning mechanisms of social support using network capital and how it can influence adaptation, I decided to follow discussions on the forum focusing on the criteria of topics and triggered reactions. I tried to find out what forms of social support emerged in each post and if the content contained intimate or practical relations or encouraged recipients to meet off-line.

Online social support

The results show that four types of social support – informational, instrumental, emotional and community building – appear within the discussions on the forum. Often women express a few types of support in the same conversation. Every day women wrote about issues related to life in Poland, comparing experience and seeking out advice. Such posts started with headings such as *"Girls, need your help/advice/ I am looking for..", "Girls, if anyone of you knows/ can refer…"*. These types of conversations have a question-answer structure and provide participants with information, advice and suggestions based on personal experience.

Although most conversations were directly or indirectly related to managing adaptation needs and referred to migration background, such as advices on insurance for residency or references to Polish language courses, there were also discussions on issues such as relationship, self-esteem or hobbies. According to the applied categories of thematic areas, the majority of posts concerned "health" and "child care" issues.

Informational support

Among the selected sample of posts and comments, information-sharing prevailed. The members of the group share formal and informal, "street-wise" (Dekker, Engbersen 2014) information, share links to official informative websites or websites of NGOs and services for migrants.

"I have given my son a year for adaptation"

Adaptation at school, the programme and exams, school performance of children at home and in a new school in Poland were discussed among members of the group. One of such examples was the discussion of experiences and advices about the role of preschool classes and adjustment to the school programme. The discussion was initiated, as one of the participants wrote that she feels uncertain after her contact with school administration, when it appeared that there is no place at preschool class and she was advised to send her children to the lower grades. The author of the post asked other members to explain if preschool is obligatory in Poland and also, if someone came across a similar situation and can share advice:

"Hi, I have a few questions about the primary school. Where we live, the school administration informed us that there is no place at preschool class. The older kids will go to other classes. What should we do with a 6 years old? ….. and the other question, they offered us to send the older kids to one grade lower, but at home they performed well, they learn foreign languages easily, I still think about the oldest (8 grades, exams…his Polish at A2) but the younger one ….. I do not want to send him to the lower grade, I am sure he will manage…..Share your experience, please…."

In such posts related to the education of children, women discussed their decisions and experience related to preschool classes and adjustment to the school environment. The language barrier appeared as an important issue on school performance and well-being of the children:

"…if the child does not speak polish….it will be very hard…to understand the maths… terms…".

Participants talked about the challenges and stress their children experienced due to the education programme, difficulties related to the understanding of materials and preparations to school exams. They also presented examples of xenophobic attitudes and behaviours among students:

"...other kids bothered her telling in Russian "we don't understand you"… "go back to your Russia"… but we are even not from Russia….Later teachers interfered, so it kind of normalized…" .

Such discussions, informal exchanges and experience-sharing allow participants to gather practical information from different perspectives on school enrolment and

education of their children, share experience on how children adjust to a new school and cope with the Polish school programme. It appeared that the issue of education raised within the group is strongly related to the migration context and comparisons with the experience of others can be important to make a decision.

"Do you know any dentists, preferably "ours"

Women use the forum to share references, advices and practical tips on day to day issues, and among different topics they often share information where to find Ukrainian or Russian-speaking specialists: an interesting finding was that women often shared recommendations regarding doctors and medical specialists. According to the results, women exchange references to a wide range of Ukrainian and Russian-speaking specialists (dentists, psychologists, surgeons, gynaecologists, neurologists, children specialists etc.) and also pay essential attention to personal recommendations and experiences of other women.

On the forum women wrote contact details, phone numbers and websites of the doctors they visited. Such mutual exchange of references and contacts to Russian and Ukrainian-speaking specialists, especially of narrow specialization, is an example of how the mechanism of networking is based on trust and credibility of individual experience.

I draw the conclusion, that the opportunity to seek help from a specialist with migration background and use native language for communication is very important for the well-being and comfort of the members in the group. On the other hand, such model of contact sharing shows consolidation of informality patters within the migrant network. Members of the group have more chances to use the network ties in "settling" day to day issues but, on the other hand, such approach can cause some forms of dependency and "closeness" of migrants within the network infrastructure.

"Magic plastic"[4]

Another form of information support refers to formal information-sharing, which provides participants with new knowledge and *better understanding* (Walter 2016: 81) of particular issues. As it was mentioned previously, according to the rules of the group, such topics as legalisation procedure are not discussed on the forum, as a special subgroup was established for this purpose. Issues that appeared in the selected sample were related to formalities required from migrants to benefit from the social support programmes in Poland. Residence permit and forms of employment/ unemployment were widely discussed as main challenges[5]:

> "…*with my husband we are waiting for temporary residence permit, do we have any chance to get newborn allowance. Or only with "magic plastic"? We pay taxes, work legally.…*"

> "…*if you didn't work in Poland or were never registered as unemployed – you can only receive help form municipality – becikowe[6], kosiniakowe[7] – depends on the family income – when you will receive the residence card…*".

In appeared that within the group there is an important role of informal "experts" or participants who declare that they have knowledge in some specific issues, so they create information transfer and have impact on the level of knowledge and attitudes of the group members. One example was a discussion about payments available for women after childbirth in Poland and how female migrants can benefit from them. The author wrote a post in which she explained the regulations according to residence status and employment. To support the information she provided links to official websites:

> "*Dear Ladies, I write here about formalities and payments, what immigrant mothers can receive after childbirth…In Poland there is a term, close to our "maternity leave", but is available only for someone, who works on contract of employment (#UmowaOpracę), for everyone who has civil contract (#UmowaZlecenia)… students and officially registered as unemployed can benefit from maternity benefit (#ZasiłekMacierzyński)…*"

Although such information is practical and helpful for the members of the group, some critical questions appear: regarding mechanisms of verification of the information and how valuable such forms of "expert advices" are in terms of everyday practices of the members of the group.

Facebook conversations prove, that female migrants use the forum to explain the meaning of abbreviations of official terms or specific terms of social benefits available in Poland as *becikowe, kosiniakowe,* or public institutions such as *mops*[8] (municipality welfare center) translating these terms to Russian, which is practical especially for women who do not speak Polish language.

The informational support shared among the members of the group provides a better understanding of the formalities related to childcare, social benefits or other issues important for them to organize life in Poland. Also it gives an overview of obstacles, that female migrants experience in obtaining access to social benefits.

Instrumental support

In the literature, instrumental support is defined as "task-oriented" advice or "assistance of the person in need" (Malecki, Demaray 2003). As I was analyzing the communication in virtual space, as an example of instrumental support I recognised written declarations to help or provide material support which were not commercial. Due to easy access participants can get fast response which can be used especially in urgent situations.

Who will go to Moscow in the next few days

Women use the forum to find contacts with someone who is planning to go to their home country and can deliver documents or goods. Interesting was the context related to the accessibility of some medical products or their equivalents available in

Poland. Women wrote about the effects of using medical products bought in Poland, compared them to products they used in the home country. From the comments it appeared that women regard medicines at home as better or claim that there are no equivalents in Poland, so they bring medicines from their home country while travelling or exchange them among each other.

> *"I don't want to upset you, but I do not feel that Polish medicines help me. I bring them from home or ask someone to bring …them for me. "*

From the comments, it appeared, that women not only share information or recommendations, but also use the forum to get access to specific medicines. Two methods of such inter-group exchange appeared. Firstly, participants look for someone who can deliver the medication from Russia, Ukraine or Belarus. The other example was sharing or exchanging of medications when participants simply wrote in comments that they already had a few packages and were willing to help. Such examples of mutual help can be viewed as a sign of maintaining continuity of consumption habits, which, taking into account the stress and challenges related to adaptation to a new environment, allow to preserve some kind of comfort. On the other hand, such kind of inter-group practices can be analyzed in categories of informal network infrastructure, that is maintained due to weak ties along with mutual trust among the participants.

Community building

What fosters community building is a sense of belonging, solidarity and mutual understanding resulting from compatible migration experience and the need to rebuild a social circle. The process improves bonding ties created among the members of the group. Such contacts initiated on the virtual platform are transferred off-line into face-to-face companionship. Analyzing the content, two types of interaction were noticed – individual initiatives to meet and events organized by moderators of the group. Both categories provide mechanisms to intensify face-to-face contacts.

"I am new here…"

According to the results initiatives to meet were reported more often by newcomers, who seek contacts and friendship in a new place for themselves or their children. The Facebook group enables easy access to a potentially large group of people with similar experience, needs and located somewhere nearby:

> *Hi everyone, who live in Ochota, lets be friends! We have moved recently and are looking for the company for common walks. We have 13 years old son, staying at home, does not have friends yet. Will be happy to get to know someone!*

As evidence, women initiate posts in order to find contact for off-line communication to overcome isolation they experience in a new country. Such examples show that immigrants, in terms of interpersonal or more intimate contacts, remain within the network, which ensures them the ability to relax and feel confident.

"Let's celebrate!"

The second category of community building initiatives, found within the Facebook content, were events organized by the moderators of the group to integrate and facilitate communication among members.

> *"Girls, the end of the year – we should celebrate it! We invite all girls from Warsaw to the last event of this year!......see you soon".*

Such events can be analysed as examples of emerging institutionalization of the group. Firstly, because they are organised by the moderator of the group. Secondly, there is evidence of attributes, used to identify the group, its logo and motto, which appeared on the cover picture of the group and also on banners during meetings in real life. This ensures symbolic distinguishing among others, constitutes the group and strengthens the sense of belonging and community. The role of moderators as informal authorities is essential. Leading the group they not only have impact on the forum content but also mediate the group identity and sense of "groupness".

Emotional support

People seek social support when they need to overcome stress and frustration or boost self-esteem (Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005: 930). Migration can be a difficult period for women as it is related with stress, doubts and the loss of social status (Dolińska 2017: 95). This study confirms that the online group is a space, where they can turn for contact and help.

"It is hard for me to make this step"

Participants seek encouragement, motivation or inspiration when it comes to deciding on migration to Poland. For example, such conversations were initiated by women who were in their home country, but were considering to move to Poland. Their major doubts were related to such problems as how to find a job or if to accept unemployment for some period of time:

> *"Dear…probably I will have to move with my husband to Warsaw, and not work for some time… It is very difficult for me to decide on this step…not to work…".*

Such topics were followed by personal stories of migration, adaptation and strategies of females, who started a new life in Poland. Participants presented different

opinions, positive but also critical attitudes, but, what seems to be interesting, none of them was negative or discouraging. For example, one of the participants commenting the post highlighted challenges and warned that life in a new country can by demanding:

"..it is important not to build pink castles…I don't want to mislead the author, and say how it is great and easy here…".

I noticed that participants were willing to share opinions as this topic was close to them and referred to personal experience. The comments seemed to be sincere and, though they wrote about difficulties, participants encouraged and supported the author to make the decision to immigrate.

"…I just wanted to support you and wish you good luck. It is always difficult at the beginning but we need to move forward…"

Analysing the content, it appeared that women use the group to write about issues, which are difficult for them, in aim to achieve emotional support – sympathy, understanding or encouragement. In discussions they present feminine and empowering thinking. Women share negative experiences they came across in Poland, stressful situations, problems in relationships, ask for advice in life changing dilemmas or raise issues of psychological and emotional well-being. Some interactions were more personalized, emotional and intimate. From discussions on the forum it appears that migration status has an essential impact on everyday lifestyle and appears in various aspects of daily practices. Migration is related to a wide range of challenges both on micro-level such as decision-making processes, state of insecurity and uncertainty. But also on the meso-level of the socio-economic position of migrant females in a new environment as migration embeds legal and social reproduction of precarity (Ejiogu 2018:260).

Discussion

The research proves, that female migrants use virtual networks as a mechanism to facilitate access to resources that allow them to improve social contact in Poland. The migration context is an important bonding feature for common understanding. Similarities in problems related to migration and adaptation encourage participants to share experience and support. Such groups create a space for information-sharing and more intimate interactions.

This study adds to our understanding of female migrants online networking and the impact of virtual social support on women's adaptation in Poland. My aim was to include the gender-oriented perspective of online networking and correlate it with knowledge on the role of migrant networks in adaptation and socialisation. For the research I selected a group on Facebook addressed to female Russian-speaking

migrants. Such kind of study improved the wider understanding of the inner infra-structure of a Russian-speaking network. As it appeared from the data, women from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia form a numerically large group of migrants in Poland. They elaborate mechanisms to foster communication among each other due to the availability of social media and create a women's group. Online "communicativeness" also enables access to informal infrastructure and network institutions. Female online social networks appeared to be more emotionally-oriented (Drentea, Moren-Cross 2005) which improves the high density of social support. Virtual space facilitates the processes of networking and allows to create relatively homogenous support groups, based on exclusive membership criteria such as gender, language and migration background, which, however, are bridging migrant women with different resources (education, social status, profession, length of stay in Poland).

Virtual networking plays a complementary role to individual social networks. On the one hand it ensures access to a wider group of women with similar experience and interests and creates a space for frank and open interactions. But, on the other hand, it is still virtual space, which following Granovetter's (1973) concept, makes ties among participants weak – fulfilling the role of disseminating information and instrumental support (Kindler, Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019: 96). Each participant has a right to preserve anonymity or to stay as a passive observator. Although, the se-lected group creates favouring conditions for community building, intensifying and strengthening ties, it remains to be the individual decision of the member of the group to transfer it into closer offline social contacts (Erdem 2018: 77).

The Facebook group allows us to have an inside look at the daily life of female mi-grants in Poland. On the forum women gain practical information related to adminis-trative regulations, advices and contacts to high-qualified specialists. Women use the group for sharing instrumental support, assisting children, helping with learning Pol-ish language or delivering and exchanging documents and medicine from the home country. When writing on the forum women gain practical information and solutions, ask for advice on decisions they feel not confident about, due to lack of knowledge and experience in Poland. Support provided within the group helps members to un-derstand the new environment, increases self-esteem and improves their emotional well-being. The analyses encourage me to conclude that migrant women reveal tendencies to choose other female migrants as a preferable target group for sharing support, companionship and spending free time. Although further research will be needed to achieve comparative results from the individual perspectives of participants of the group including also research on other women's Facebook groups in Poland. Online "connectivity" allows to maintain communicative relations (Hepp, Bozdag, Suna 2012) and also to extend the scope of contacts and acquaintances and strength-en the network of informal infrastructure.

Although the main aim of the research was to describe the female online group and understand the mechanisms of networking and social support, a few questions

emerge and should be studied in further research and discussion. Firstly, there are doubts concerning membership conditions, especially the role of Russian language as a main language of conversations. Such practice can both be inclusive for women from different post-soviet countries, but, on the other hand it preserves some imperialistic patterns of Russian-language and Russian-culture supremacy. This can design patterns for hierarchical structures within the members of the group. For example, it is listed in the group rules, that other than Russian or Polish-language posts will be deleted from the group forum. Such practice can cause conflicts, shape and embed inter-group hostile attitudes or exclude other female migrants from the network resources. Moreover, such model of group identification, enhanced by group authorities and continued in a different range of practices of community building as social and cultural events, reproduces the stereotype that migrants from post-Soviet republics are Russian-speaking. Such attitude undermines the diversity of migrant communities and is preclusive for various groups of migrants.

The other question is related to the concept of "mediatised migrant", introduced by Hepp (Hepp et al. 2012) and the impact of moderated information transfer on migrant daily lifestyle and decision-making processes. Such question emerges from the role of moderators and "group experts" who create the context of online communication and shape the group knowledge and attitudes. It will be essential in further research to find out the level of trustfulness to the group "authorities", their impact on daily practices and if any forms of dependency or socially-reproducing precarity (Ejiogu 2018) appear among the group members.

Discussions on the forum present evidence of a diverse range of the network's social and economic institutions and mechanisms of informal practices. It will be important to answer the question if there are any correlations between online group membership and access to the network infrastructure and if there are forms of exclusion for non-members. On the other hand, further research should include the question, if there are any trends that show correlations between online "communicative connectivity", extension of migrant network infrastructure and preservation of socio-cultural/socio-economic informality patterns among migrant groups in Poland.

The current research also omits the analyses of how virtual networking and online social support can be perceived and utilized differentiating the role of active and passive participants of the group. As the text once published remains available in the group, some participants can gain information just scrolling the group. But, for the others, the process of interaction and involvement into discussions can have a crucial meaning.

And finally, in the current paper I have focused on the aspect of adaptation of female migrants in Poland, and further research will be needed to answer the question on how the migrants virtual social network affects integration and creates social bridges with members of the receiving society (Kindler, Wójcikowska-Baniak 2019: 110).

Concluding remarks

To summarize, the women's group on Facebook FB_Group_1 is an example of virtual social networking of female migrants in Poland. Due to current migration trends and development of online communication, Russian-speaking women successfully create online networks for communication and self-help.

Members of the group focus on issues relevant for women in the process of adaptation to life in a new county. Health and child care are among the most frequently discussed topics on the forum. Both issues have a strong connection with migration, as women tend to prefer Russian or Ukrainian-speaking specialists for themselves and their children and "child care" issues were related to adaptation and socialisation of the child.

The results show that women use the group as a platform for information-sharing, mutual support and empowering. Communication within the Facebook group facilitates access to the migrant network and its recourses. Online social support (informational, instrumental, emotional and community building) improves adaptation and fosters interpersonal contacts among members of the group. Nevertheless, migration causes some forms of socially-reproducing precarity. Exclusiveness of the bonding mechanism defined by language can be, firstly, precluding for other female migrants from post-Soviet states. Contracted and moderated by the leader of the group a sense of "groupness" reproduces the stereotype of "Russian-speaking migrant". Tightening relations within the network may cause a set back in integration and embed socially-reproducing precarity and have impact on the information transfer and articulation of migrant identity and attitudes, what will be important for further studies.

Notes

1. According to information on the website of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage there are scholarship programs for foreigners of Polish origin or Polish nationality realized due to the "Governmental program of cooperation with the Polish diaspora and Poles abroad". The program is dedicated to students-holders of Karta Polaka (Pole's Card, according to the Act of September 7, 2007 on Karta Polaka or Polish origin ascertained in accordance with the Act of November 9, 2000 on repatriation). According to the law, students can undergo all types of studies in full-time mode free of charge at public universities.
2. Karta Polaka (Poles' Card) – a document regulated by the Act of 7 September 2007 on Karta Polaka, Journal of Laws 2019, item 1095. According to the law the person who can prove belonging to the Polish nation and meets specific requirements regulated in the act can benefit from a range of facilitations such as the right to apply for national visa/ permanent residence/citizenship free of charge, grants them open and equal access to education, labour market and health care in urgent situations.

3. According to information on the website of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy simplified employment procedures are applicable in the case of employees coming from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine. The procedure was introduced in 2018 on the basis of the Regulation of the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy of 7 December 2017 on issuing work permits for foreigners and entering into register statements of entrusting work to foreigners (Journal of Laws 2017. 2345) and is regulated by the Act of 20 April 2004 on employment promotion, labour and market institutions (Journal of Laws 2010.1065). According to the regulation the foreigner (employee from Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine) is not obliged to possess a work permit if the employer has passed a declaration to entrust work to foreigner to the poviat labor office.

4. Magic plastic – colloquial form migrants use to talk about the residence card.

5. Access to social assistance for foreigners is regulated by the Act of 12 March 2004 on social assistance (Journal of Laws 2019.0.1507).

6. Kosiniakowe – parental benefit in the amount of 1000PLN for women who are not entitled to maternity allowance, because they do not work or work without insurance contributions.

7. Becikowe – "baby bonus" or childbirth allowance, one-time paid benefit in the amount of 1000 PLN.

8. Urban Social Welfare Center (Miejski Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej, MOPS) or Social Welfare Centre (Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej, OPS) – local government institutions providing social assistance on behalf of the President of the city.

Acknowledgements

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