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Do I deserve to belong? Migrants' perspectives on the debate of deservingness and belonging

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ABSTRACT
The notion of belonging, prominent in social sciences, has been recently used extensively in relation to Central Eastern European migrants in the UK. Whereas the Brexit debates on migration have spotlighted the macro-politics of belonging and the judgments on who deserves to stay and under which conditions, the question of how these discourses of 'deservingness' surrounding Brexit may influence the everyday and intimate aspects of belonging among migrants warrants further exploration. Drawing on the interviews with 77 young Polish and Lithuanian migrants in the UK conducted from 2019 to 2020, this article examines how migrants position themselves in relation to the discourses of deservingness and hierarchies of desirability. The focus is also placed on how they negotiate their strategies of (un)belonging to the British society. We argue that the prominence of the deservingness discourse – which has gained momentum in Brexit Britain - entraps migrants in the constant process of boundary making and may prevent them from ever feeling part of the 'community of value'.

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Introduction

The unfolding contexts of subsequent social crises – including the Global Financial Crisis, Brexit, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated the existing tensions between the majority and migrant/ethnic minorities. Focusing on Central and Eastern Europeans (CEE) in the United Kingdom, we investigate how such unsettling events (Kilkey and Ryan 2020) tend to reinvigorate the debate on the rules of belonging and challenge the deservingness of migrants. Revisiting Yuval-Davis' arguments (2006) on the inherent dichotomy between the more personal, routinised and intimate belonging, as opposed to the politics of belonging constructed and deployed at the macro-level, we

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set out to demonstrate how migrants from Poland and Lithuania reconstruct and deconstruct their belonging in the post-Brexit United Kingdom.

More specifically, we demonstrate how migrants both self-position in the deservingness debate, as well as refer to other migrant groups and the wider British society. We also draw attention to how they diverge in reflecting the dominant discourses of belonging. Therefore, the paper unpacks the entwinement of belonging and deservingness in 'Brexit Britain' from the migrants' perspective. Drawing on a qualitative dataset of interviews carried out between 2019 and 2020 with Polish and Lithuanian post-accession[1] migrants in the UK, we approach the pertinent questions of belonging. We demonstrate deconstructed and mirrored discourses of deservingness, views and strategies related to both contested and embraced forms of belonging. Thus, this paper not only asks in what contexts belonging emerges as important, but also posits that there is a missing element in interpreting how migrants' perception of British society impacts on the willingness to belong and necessity of belonging in times of austerity. We argue that Polish and Lithuanian migrants have simultaneously become victimised by the belonging and deservingness debates, and actively reproduce categories used by these discourses. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the imposed categories of ethnic boundaries paramount to the definitions of belonging are not fixed, and it is precisely the 'unfixed-ness' of these categories which creates a situation where many migrants often feel obliged to prove their deservingness and avoid the risk of being seen as 'undeserving'.

The divisive discourse on immigration and reference to ethnic boundaries has been continuously present in public discourse and especially in the communications of the Conservative party, who have been governing the country for the past decade (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008). In fact, ethnicity first became a prominent element of the debate on Britishness in the post-war United Kingdom. A legal distinction was made for the first time between citizenship and belonging whereas the UK-born population and its descendants were defined as 'citizens who belong' and immigrants born in the former colonies deemed 'citizens who do not belong' (Hampshire 2005, 11). This change in citizenship policies reflected a shifting popular view of the racialized Britishness claims wherein 'membership of the national community was more about ethnicity than affiliation to a set of civic ideals and values' (Hampshire 2005, 12). The debate today is also an obverse of the politics of austerity, which have generally revealed social polarisation and called attention to redistribution patterns. In political discourses, privileged treatment of migrants and ethnic communities has been implied, largely to mobilise majority voters when welfare transfers were tightened as a result of the Global Financial Crisis (Anderson 2013; Kilkey 2017). Interestingly, the question of who constitutes the category of those 'undeserving' migrants is pragmatic and arbitrarily based on political calculations. Sometimes it has been those who want to 'make a mockery of our hospitality' (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008), at other times the emphasis has been on Eastern Europeans overusing child benefits, while the asylum seekers waiting in the Calais Jungle Camp took centre stage when rendered a 'swarm' in David Cameron's speech (Dhaliwal and Forkert 2015). Jones et al. (2017) recall this in the politics of the 'hostile environment' brought to the fore by Theresa May during her time in the Home Office, when the 'Go Home' campaign, for instance, created anxieties among different categories of migrants and ethnic minorities, even if they had been in the country for decades. Dhaliwal and Forkert (2015) observe that different types of migrants internalize anti-immigrant

language and use the same categories of 'good' and 'bad' or 'deserving' and 'undeserving' in their narratives about 'others'. This can be seen as an attempt to 'self-legitimize', recognising that perhaps they are not 'fully-fledged citizens' but, unlike those perceived as less-successful (e.g. in terms of contributions or fitting in socially and culturally with the majority), they certainly make an effort to diminish their distance from those with unquestionable legitimacy.

In the following sections, we first situate our findings in the broader theoretical framework of belonging and deservingness. After presenting the study's methodology, we discuss ways in which Polish and Lithuanian migrants in the UK engage with discourses of 'deservingness' and subsequently explore how they negotiate or resist these discourses, pursuing different belonging strategies in 'Brexit Britain'.

Politics of belonging and engendering migrant hierarchies through discourses of 'deservingness'

The notion of belonging, ever prominent in social sciences, has regained popularity in migration studies in recent decades (Davis, Ghorashi, and Smets 2018). Although in theoretical debates the multiscalar, multilocal and fluid character of belonging has been acknowledged and highlighted (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Davis, Ghorashi, and Smets 2018; Kelly 2018), it has been applied across contexts and meanings, often heuristically and in rather generic terms devoid of problematization (Antonsich 2010). Moreover, despite the 'mobility turn' (Urry 2007) and methodological nationalism being contested (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), the notion of belonging, as well as similar concepts such as home or rootedness, are often used in a biased and essentializing way. In many respects, the critique of 'sedentary bias' formulated in the 1990s by Malkki (1995) is still in force, even though an increasing number of people are mobile and lead transnational lifestyles.

There is a certain paradox in that the belonging of the majority is rarely a topic, while the minorities are constantly called upon to prove their claims of legitimately belonging to host societies, regardless of how multicultural these are (e.g. Krzyżanowski and Wodak 2008). From a theoretical stance, it indicates that Yuval-Davis' argument about differentiating individual, affective belonging from the systemic politics of belonging (2006) seems to be ignored in favour of the 'deservingness' claims. While the former is an intimate sense of feeling safe, accepted and part of some kind of entity, the latter is the 'dirty work of boundary maintenance' (Crowley 1999, 30), still often bound to the legitimacy of being included in the processes of redistributing resources on the basis of shared citizenship (Putnam 2007; Osipovič 2015). Anderson (2013) argues that drawing dividing lines allows modern states to position themselves as 'communities of value' composed of citizens who share ideas and codes of conduct. Those 'communities of value' are populated by 'law-abiding' and 'hard working' good citizens, as differentiated from 'failed citizens' (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; Dhaliwal and Forkert 2015). Both non-citizens (such as migrants and refugees) and failed citizens are represented in similar terms as an inside and outside threat for the respectable citizens of the 'community of value'. Along the same lines, Tyler (2013) suggests that state discourses construe 'abject subjects' and that this creation reinforces the 'work of boundary maintenance' because people aim at differentiating themselves from those who are excluded and perceived as a source of aversion.

Reflecting exactly that, a body of research explores how political discourses on immigration lead to the creation of different types of migrants based on their deservingness. These discourses introduce purposeful oppositions between (deserving) hard working 'good immigrants', who are welcome in the UK, and 'others' who may be a threat to the 'British way of life' and represent 'failed citizens' (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; Dhaliwal and Forkert 2015). What transpires from these framings, however, is rarely about belonging. Instead, it has more to do with the personal and economic safety of the majority members. In this context, there are recurring themes of migrants as 'benefit scroungers' who deliberately abuse the generosity of the social welfare system (Datta et al. 2006; Gibson, Crossland, and Hamilton 2018). Together with notes on unfairly leveraging the hospitality of the British people, the discourse also foregrounds migrants as criminals who are seen as having nothing to lose by breaking the law abroad (Mawby and Gisby 2009; Parkin 2013).

In the same vein, Osipovič (2015) recounts survey evidence of decreasing support for migrants' inclusion in the welfare system, which is paired with distrust of the state's redistribution capabilities and fairness (see also Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014). Additionally, while deservingness could hinge upon migrants' substantial contributions through taxation, the majority sees their input as low and disproportional to the perceived advantages they receive in terms of welfare access. On this basis, Osipovič argues that the public's concerns about belonging to a community indicate a retreat to 'the normative principles of deservingness' which are grounded in economic validation ('working' or 'earning' to belong) rather than a sign of a xenophobic lack of acceptance into the community of belonging (ibid, see also Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2012).

The recounted discourses give insight into the conditionality of inclusion and entitlements that are limited to certain categories of people and often strictly linked to the labour market (Dwyer 2004). While more studies have tackled the perspectives of how host societies recognise the deservingness of migrants, fewer studies deal with migrants' self-positioning in relation to these perceptions (Osipovič 2015). Nevertheless, the discourses are mirrored in migrants' accounts, engendering feelings of 'self-doubt' about one's own legitimacy and deservingness. Even more so, they can be shaped by the often-simplistic interpretations of attitudes towards otherness among CEE migrants. On the one hand, the intimate belonging of Poles has often been seen through their spatial withdrawal and absence of relationships forged with 'other' communities (Rzepnikowska 2016; see also Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2011). On the other hand, the politics of belonging reflected by the migrants has been picked up and integrated into the discourse, framing a generalised standpoint of CEE migrants perceiving 'ethnic diversity as abnormal' (Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich 2006, 18) and expressing racist views (D'Angelo and Ryan 2011; see also Barglowski and Pustulka 2018).

Fox and Mogilnicka (2018), argue that East European migrants use divisive categories and racist discourses strategically – as a way of securing their own place in racial and class hierarchies of British society. Mirroring the conflation of deservingness and belonging present in the discourse, migrants express reciprocal views and juxtapose their own, valuable contributions with disapproval of those who 'accept handouts' (Timonen and Doyle 2009; Willen 2012), namely the recipients of extended assistance provided by the welfare state (e.g. child benefits, tax credits). Thus, migrants actively partake in (re)creating inner hierarchies of deservingness by emphasizing the non-belonging of those in worse

positions. As such, they are playing up to the discursive rules of belonging and deservingness set up by the majority, based on the high commodification of conflated neoliberalism and austerity (Timonen and Doyle 2009). These rules stem from a 'fundamental desire to participate in the generalised relations of reciprocity that define social personhood and inclusion within a broader moral community' (Willen 2012, 819). In this context, the notion of 'normal life' (Galasińska and Kozłowska 2009; McGhee, Heath, and Trevena 2012), which has been the socio-economic aspiration of many post-accession migrants, is also used to create boundaries between the 'good' and the 'bad' or 'failed' individuals whose lives are presumably 'abnormal'.

At the same time, the blossoming literature shedding light on intimate belonging tries to evade its politicisation. In this research stream it has been argued that, despite the political projects imposing boundaries and exclusions, migrants display their agency in negotiating, contesting and re-defining their belonging (Clayton 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019; Kilkey and Ryan 2020). One example of individual and depoliticised belonging is shown in how migrants relate to cities or neighbourhoods, and develop attachment to a place or locality more easily and often without reference to national politics (Kelly 2018; see also Van der Graaf 2009; Botterill and Hancock 2018).

To sum up, political discourse on deservingness constantly exerts pressure on migrants to prove that they can be part of the 'community of value' (Anderson 2013). They are expected to perform in order to be considered 'good migrants' and prove their worthiness to British society. These expectations and the divisive rhetoric affect migrants, who often feel that they need to either 'prove' their legitimacy by affectively internalising and reproducing discourses on 'good and bad migrants', or reject the deservingness debate and refuse to categorise themselves and others. In the latter context, they might invent alternative narratives of belonging instead.

Data and methods

This paper is based on empirical material from an international, mixed-methods project 'CEEYouth: The comparative study of young migrants from Poland and Lithuania in the context of Brexit' which seeks to gauge the unfolding experiences of Polish and Lithuanian migrants in the United Kingdom during the post-Brexit-referendum period. From the three components of the research project, we specifically draw on the data from a Qualitative Longitudinal Study (QLS), conducted using the format developed by Neale (2019). The QLS design entails a combination of IDIs (in-depth interviews) and asynchronous interviews (Meho 2006; Ratislavová and Ratislav 2014), with five waves planned in total. To date, the dataset spans three encounters: a wave of semi-structured interviews (Q1/2019), a round of asynchronous interviews (Q3/2019) and a mixed set comprising in-depth and asynchronous interviews driven by funnelling (Q1/2020). There were 77 participants (41 Poles and 36 Lithuanians) who we began to 'walk alongside' of (Neale 2019) since our first encounter. As a relatively less engaging for participants and easy to arrange method of interviewing, asynchronous interviews seem to be a good way of collecting people's reactions and reflections on the unfolding events. Thus, during the first interview, each participant chose how they want to be contacted in future (the majority chose e-mail, some Messenger or Whatsapp) and in the subsequent waves they received a message with

several questions. Upon receiving a response, we were asking follow-up questions to get more in-depth information.

The recruitment involved a mixture of convenience and purposive sampling, as we focused on the heterogeneity of interviewees' experiences and life-situations. Various recruitment techniques ranging from personal networks, social media advertisements, to contacting migrant organisations and snowballing, were employed by the research team during recruitment. The research design was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at the leading partner institution. All interviews were conducted in the native languages of the participants, either face-to-face or online, to address geographical dispersion.

The pool of interviewees was composed of 29 men and 48 women born between 1983 and 1997 (with an average age of just over 30 years old). The duration of residence abroad varied from 2 to 15 years at the time of the first interview, with an average length of stay of 7 years. The sample was intentionally diversified in terms of place of residence in the UK: about ⅓ of participants lived in London, about ⅓ in Midlands, and about ⅓ in Scotland. For each location, interviewees were recruited from large cities, suburbs and smaller towns in the area. Not uncommonly for these national groups, there is a bias towards well-educated participants: 56 were university-educated and a further 8 are in pursuit of tertiary degrees. In order to balance this bias, we aimed at recruiting people occupying different positions on the labour market, i.e. from those doing manual jobs to highly skilled professionals. Predictably, subsequent waves of the QLS saw fluctuations in the numbers of participants: 72 took part in the second wave, whereas 33 in-depth interviews and 31 asynchronous exchanges took place during the third wave. This represents a relatively low dropout rate (see also Neale 2019).

In the first step of the analysis, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were transcribed in Lithuanian/Polish, while the asynchronous interviews were meticulously registered in a dedicated documentation folder. For each participant a dynamic, thematic framework grid in English was created and gradually filled in after each wave. This strategy enabled both analytical work within national teams as well as cross-national comparisons. For this article, we conducted a thematic analysis (Saldana 2009) focusing on the data which explicitly referred to or otherwise illuminated the constructions of the interviewees' sense of belonging in the UK. Specifically, the emerging themes focused on the ways migrants position themselves towards the discourses on their belonging and deservingness. Longitudinal data encompassing approximately one year allowed us for the ongoing examination of people's reactions to Brexit as a political project enabled by a more nuanced temporal approach. For instance, in the first wave of interviews, we noticed that the debates and experiences surrounding the referendum sparked a lot of strong and often negative emotions. Many of our respondents felt disappointed, upset and unwelcome, which is consistent with other studies (e.g. Guma and Dafydd Jones 2019). In the third wave, which took place approximately a year later, we wanted to deepen this topic via a specifically developed section on our respondents' attitudes to the UK and their place in the British society. At this time, there was widespread fatigue with the issue of Brexit and the consequences it may have for migrants, the emotional tone of those interviews was less animated (Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira 2020). However, our respondents were keen to discuss their take on British society and the shifts in relationships both between migrants and their host society, as well as between

migrants in the post-Brexit referendum reality. It is these exchanges that we mainly use for the analysis that follows. Although we use two national groups in this study, they are similar in many respects and we do not aim to compare them here. Both Poles and Lithuanians are post-2004 accession migrants, coming from a similar part of the world (Central and Eastern Europe) characterised by largely monocultural societies. They share main socio-demographic characteristics as immigrants in the UK, e.g. being white, young, mainly employed in manual and low-skilled jobs for which they are overqualified (Parutis 2011). While there are differences between these two groups in terms of how they experience racism and exclusion in the UK, we found their responses similar in terms of discursive positionings in the debate on deservingness that is in focus here. Rather than marking differences, we focus on the common themes in their narratives.

Deconstructing the deservingness and belonging from migrants' perspective

In the following parts of the article, we first unpack the ways in which Polish and Lithuanian migrants[2] in the UK engage with the discourse of 'deservingness' and how they reproduce the categories of 'good' and 'bad' migrants, trying to negotiate their own place in British society. We argue that the categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' are not fixed, and it is precisely their vagueness and instability which creates a situation where many migrants often feel obliged to prove their deservingness and avoid the risk of becoming viewed as 'undeserving'. They do so by creating and reproducing boundaries within their own ethnic communities, as well as between other communities of migrants and non-migrants. We posit that Polish and Lithuanian migrants simultaneously become victimised by this debate, and therefore actively reproduce the categories used in this discourse to victimise others or, at times, try to resist the debate entirely by developing alternative voices. Thus, in the last empirical section, we explore the ways in which migrants attempt to resist and reject the imposed notions.

Displaying one's deservingness through being a 'good migrant'

In the post-Brexit reality, CEE migrants' belonging has become a recurring theme. When talking about their right to reside and stay in the UK after Brexit referendum, the Poles and Lithuanians we interviewed often relied on the deservingness categories presented in the media and political discourse. They emphasized that they are hardworking migrants who contribute to society without relying on social welfare. Being aware of the conditionality of deservingness, they portrayed themselves as 'good migrants' who received no handouts and referred to their 'good' jobs, citing economic contributions as a backbone for their right to belong (Anderson 2013; Tyler 2013). As Jolanta, a woman from Lithuania told us in the interview: 'I work, I earn, I have a fully-fledged job' (Jolanta, F, LT, factory worker[3]). A similar argument rooted in the deservingness discourse concerned paying taxes. Jolanta further stated: 'I pay to the state, I have a family, my partner is self-employed, we pay taxes, therefore we have nothing to worry about'. Similarly, Sabina, an accountant from Lithuania, shared the belief that her family's financial contributions would guarantee they are welcome in the UK: 'We are paying taxes, no one will want to send us away'.

In addition, owning a property completes the triad of economic markers which validate one's status in the UK in the eyes of the interviewees: 'As a homeowner you are safe'

(Erikas, M, LT, oil company worker). Home ownership binds people financially, as they often have mortgages, but also emotionally: 'we own a house, so we have this huge mortgage to pay. It will not be easy to just pack and leave, we now have roots here in a way' (Magda, F, PL, customer service clerk). One may argue that the consistent discourse of Eastern European migrants as 'economic' (e.g. McCullum and Findlay 2015) has become ingrained in their belonging claims: as long as they are financially viable for the British economy, their rights will not be questioned (see also Osipovič 2015). Sabina's and Jolanta's quotations above also give an insight into how these deservingness claims are entwined with neoliberal and austerity discourses which value those who create exchange value (Jones et al. 2017, 122).

Apart from arguments citing economic contributions, in the process of constantly negotiating their status as 'good migrants', interviewees also refer to the idea of 'being normal' as a way of securing their position in the UK: 'If you are a normal person, you behave normally, reasonably, and leave no misunderstandings about yourself for a Scottish person, then he will not say a bad word about you and your nation' (Erikas, M, LT, oil company worker). Interestingly, the recurrent theme of 'normality' in migrants' narratives may have a twofold meaning. While early post-accession migrants aspired to a 'normal life' hinging upon economic security, ease of living and a more dignified position on the labour market (Galasińska and Kozłowska 2009; McGhee, Heath, and Trevena 2012), the same concept may be used to create boundaries between those who do not share these lifestyle choices and aspirations. Thus, we feel that in 'Brexit Britain' these claims are made to escape what Tyler (2013:, 4) identifies as 'revolting subjects' in the deservingness discourses. Tyler argues that the creation of 'abject subjects', such as asylum seekers or unemployed youth, triggers a sense of disgust and repulsion. It calculatedly reinforces the dividing lines between the 'good citizens' and the undeserving others. Our reading of Erikas' desire to come across as 'normal' is therefore not just about his economic aspiration, but about his desire not to be seen as 'abject'.

Some of our respondents, especially those highly-skilled, are aware of their privileged positions among migrants in the discursive hierarchies of deservingness. Artur says: 'I am white, and I had all those good internships and stuff, so I would see myself in this 'bubble'. Because, really, you know, all my friends graduated from Oxford, LSE, Cambridge, UCL, only top universities' (Artur, M, PL, financial consultant). Artur seems conscious of his 'desirability' in British society, but he is also well aware of the rules that drive this desirability. Interestingly, it is not just his educational and professional background that place him in a bubble, but also his racial privilege inherently tied to 'whiteness' (c.f. Botterill and Burrell 2019). This quote can help us to understand that while our respondents begin by quoting 'objective' criteria of desirability such as employment, taxes or being 'normal', there are racial or ethnic undertones present in their discourses on 'bad' migrants and 'failed citizens'. We discuss the latter in the subsequent section of this article.

Questioning the deservingness of 'bad' migrants and 'failed citizens'

Grounding their own 'deservingness' claims in socio-economic and morality arguments ('normal people'), some of our interviewees explicitly talk about the 'others', who, in their

eyes, do not contribute (enough) to the British state. This 'undeservingness' can include equally other migrants, but also the native British who Anderson (2013) deemed 'failed citizens'.

Underlining their own valuable contributions to the British economy and welfare state, migrants may turn to criticising those who 'accept handouts' (Timonen and Doyle 2009; Willen 2012). The main marker of a 'bad' migrant seems to be related to claiming social benefits, which mirrors the media and political discourses present in the UK (see Datta et al. 2006; Gibson, Crossland, and Hamilton 2018). Sharing her life experiences in England after the Brexit referendum, Jolanta makes a powerful and vivid distinction between the 'good' (employed, paying taxes) migrants and those, who 'do not work, live off benefits and do not put enough effort [into making it]' (Jolanta, F, LT, factory worker). The distinction, however, is made not only between 'me'/ 'us' (good migrants) and 'them' (bad migrants), but also within British society, differentiating between the educated British ('who know they need Europe') and non-educated British ('who blame migrants for stealing their jobs, using their social security system'). According to Aida, 'there are actually few migrants who abuse the system and many non-educated British who have been doing that for generations; they claim unemployment, never want to work, some don't even know how to live differently' (Aida, F, LT, engineering professional).

There are recurring themes of migrants as 'benefit scroungers' (Datta et al. 2006; Gibson, Crossland, and Hamilton 2018), 'cheating the state' and unfairly leveraging its hospitality, as well as 'failed citizens' who live off the state. This type of 'othering' mechanism also applies to the local population. Ksenia, refers to the local 'social pathology' when speaking about her willingness to move out of her bad neighbourhood in Manchester: 'these are typical British families, nobody could be bothered to get a job for several generations. [They] get pregnant at the age of 15 and at the age of 32 they are already grandmothers. They drink excessively and take drugs. (…) The council estate at its finest' (Ksenia, F, PL, quality control officer for a small manufacturer). This echoes Aida's narrative (quoted above) about 'non-educated Brits', whom she generally calls the 'lower stratum' (Aida, F, LT, engineering professional).

Overall, the British 'normalness', referred to by Anderson (2013) as the 'community of value', seems to be constructed based on similar criteria of deservingness as in the case of migrants: educational and labour market status, pro-European stance and 'normal' family life. Meanwhile, 'failed Brits' are pictured as uneducated, presenting anti-European and anti-immigration attitudes. They are associated with teen pregnancies, (extensive) drug and alcohol consumption and intergenerational transmission of welfare-dependence. In the narratives of Poles and Lithuanians, the latter category of the British people is excluded from the 'community of value', which suggests that they have lost their right to judge the deservingness of 'others'.

These above described social practices of 'othering' are interrelated and often reinforced by what is sometimes referred to as 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance' (Crowley 1999, 30), evocative of racial frames (see Rzepnikowska 2016; 2019). Our interviewees' narratives on deserving Polish and Lithuanian migrants demonstrate an awareness of the ethnic and racial hierarchies in British society. Moreover, they often, unintentionally, or strategically reproduce these categories (Erel 2011; Anthias 2012) in an attempt to secure their own position and the intra-migrant and intra-ethnic

hierarchies. For instance, Zosia's words below give insight into understanding how arguments about not working hard enough (like Poles) and not making an effort to learn English are used to draw symbolic lines on ethnic and citizenship grounds: 'These Pakistanis, oh, they are lazy! I had issues with them in my previous job (…) it pisses me off, on my English course, there was a guy, Mohammed, and when he was talking, he could barely express himself. (…) He couldn't speak, he couldn't write, and he had English citizenship and this course for free' (Zosia, F, PL, administration professional in a factory).

Sometimes, however, this political 'othering' and discrimination of 'otherness' takes place within own ethnic groups and is indicative of intersections of ethnicity and class in establishing hierarchies of 'deservingness'. Often our highly-educated interviewees referred dismissively to 'other' migrants meaning their co-nationals who have rural origins, 'stick together', often do not speak English and seem to be 'less tolerant'. The way of speaking and, most importantly, the lack of English language skills, is often mentioned as a distinguishing factor which singles CEE migrants out in what they perceive as British eyes: 'For example, I clearly speak English well, I am able to explain myself, clarify things. People who do not speak English that well usually float in the 'stratum' where people are less tolerant, they might have problems in their daily lives' (Ringailė, F, LT, MA student). This lack of language competency is often seen as intertwined with lacking the social skills that would make some categories of migrants 'good enough' to be recognised as part of the community: 'they have their manners, their way of talking, which is not a polite British way of, you know, speaking; they do not know the language … people, like British people; they see them as outsiders' (Ingrida, F, LT, analyst). While this shows an essentialised and stereotypical idea of 'Britishness', it reflects the elusive importance of social cues for the capacity to belong. It also gives insight into classist discourses through which migrants of better socioeconomic status detach themselves from less privileged classes of their co-nationals in their strive for recognition.

Negotiating aspirations and chances to belong to the 'community of value'

Our data suggests that 'deserving' does not necessarily guarantee being accepted into the 'community of value' for the interviewed migrants. On the contrary, most of our respondents feel somewhat 'on the outside looking in' when it comes to the British society. They observe a clear divide between 'the British' and the 'rest of us'. This impression, in some form, is present across the different social strata of the migrants to whom we spoke. Despite fulfilling the requirements for qualifying as 'good' migrants, our interviewees still feel that their migrant status automatically renders them 'not good enough' and situates them outside the 'community of value' (Anderson 2013). Some find this constant process of negotiating and renegotiating their belongings tiring and realise that no matter how hard they try or how high they go, they will always be positioned somewhat on the outskirts of society.

There are some who openly contest aspirations to become part of the British 'community of value' defined by the rules of deservingness which they have no power to influence. This is especially prominent among the highly-skilled group of migrants, who simultaneously, thanks to their privileged positions, feel more confident about their place in the world and are sure that they could succeed somewhere else if they

ever left the UK. For example, Kamila, who is an established doctor in the UK, has an English fiancé and English best friends, openly denies wishing to 'become British' and has no desire to obtain British citizenship. This is because she does not feel like she wants to belong to 'Brexit Britain': 'I don't really want to [become British]. It's just that I live here and work and earn money because my work is what it is and it would be difficult for me to do my specialisation elsewhere. I don't want to be British (…), I don't feel British. I don't actually want to have anything to do with [the British] apart from the fact that I live here, and I hope that I won't live here forever' (Kamila, F, PL, medical doctor). Her reluctance is based on personal experiences of discrimination and harassment in the work place, but also within closer family circles to which she only feels 'conditionally' accepted. Edita (F, LT, analyst) similarly articulates that nobody has a right to tell her that she is or is not British: 'If I decide that this is my identity, like … and someone comes and says 'you are not British' or 'you cannot be here' … I will say to that 'pff, I have all the rights to be here and I can prove this to you ' […] nobody has a right to decide what is Britishness and what is identity overall'. Prior to the referendum, she saw migratory status more as a matter of fact, than a judgement on possibilities on her belonging: 'before I thought that if they do not think that I am British, it means that I am not British, but not anymore […] I will decide for myself what my identity is, not someone from the side'. Her response to the discursive exclusion that she experienced after the referendum made her eager to emphasize her own individual right to decide about her deservingness and aspirations.

Following that, some aim at creating their frames of belonging by abandoning 'community of value' defined in national terms altogether. They call themselves cosmopolitan rather than British, Lithuanian, or Polish, capitalising on their EU passports and education: 'I'm a citizen of the world, not British' (Kristina, F, LT, events coordinator). They feel that they can lead mobile lives and move to another country if/ when they have outgrown the opportunities offered to them by the UK, which points towards their relative position of privilege despite their migratory status (Botterill and Burrell 2019).

Other responses are less about resistance to certain categorizations and more about pragmatic choices. Many apply for settled status, some apply for British citizenship, stating that it would give them a certain level of legitimacy in the UK in regards to their legal stay and ability to work. Having done so, they had no illusions that a UK passport will make them any 'more British' in the eyes of the majority. One Lithuanian expresses this in the following way 'But you can't really be British if you were not born in the UK' (Eimantas, M, LT, electrical trade worker) relying on essentialised understandings of Britishness as the ultimate way into the society. For Ryszard, a policy expert based in London, taking part in the citizenship ceremony could have been a rare moment of acceptance into the 'society', yet it was tainted by the 'affective atmospheres' of Brexit which had made him painfully aware of the difference between possessing a (much needed) legal document confirming one's right to stay and the unambiguous acceptance as part of the community (Closs Stephens 2016).

Re-imagining the 'community of value' as a community of migrants

To sum up, for many of our respondents becoming 'fully' British is not only impossible but also undesirable. Some of our respondents were furthermore redrawing the image of

the 'community of value' that would depart from the essentialised notions of Britishness and instead lean towards a 'community of migrants in the UK' as the basis of their belonging. It is precisely the presence of other migrants that made them feel like they can 'fit in' to the society and stay comfortable in the UK. As Patrycja points out: 'I have learned over time that in order to survive in British culture I need to be surrounded by the company of other migrants, especially those from South and Eastern Europe' (F, PL, UX designer and pilates teacher). This particular strategy of surrounding herself with other migrants not only contributes to the vision of Britain that she could be fond of, but also to her personal well-being. Similarly Sabina explains it this way: 'When I worked in several companies, I did not really find 'points of contact' with British people. I get along better with people from other places, especially with people from Asia, they are somewhat simple, warm people, so it's always like this. Or with other Europeans. British are somehow foreign to me' (Sabina, F, LT, accountant).

To reiterate, these notions of closeness and affiliations to other migrants and ethnic minorities allow migrants to bypass the discursive vision of 'white/middle-class' belonging and, instead, base their belonging on becoming a citizen of Britain as a community of migrants.

For some interviewees, Brexit was a trigger for a kind of collective mobilisation for migrants, especially those coming from the EU and an embodiment of the 'community of migrants' in action: 'after the referendum several groups were set up on Facebook, 'EU Citizens in the UK' and 'British Citizens in Europe' among others, and I joined, and also other groups, and I met really cool friends this way, who are EU citizens, Germans, Romanians etc. And from time to time we even meet offline. This is one positive aspect of Brexit, this mobilisation of society, this is incredible' (Sebastian, M, PL, health carer). While, as we have explored above, Brexit triggered internal 'othering' among migrants and divisions for 'good' and 'bad' migrants, it has, simultaneously, unleashed unprecedented resources of intra-migrant solidarities and a sense of togetherness of the shared fate that go above ethnic or national lines.

Concluding remarks

The divisive language which stigmatises and categorises migrants has been an element of British politics for decades, starting with racialized discourses defining the non-belonging of post-colonial migrants in post-war Britain and intensifying to especially loud outcries at times of economic hardship. With the establishment of the Conservative government, the anti-immigration and divisive rhetoric has entered the mainstream of political and social debate (Datta et al. 2006; Anderson 2013; Osipovič 2015; Jones et al. 2017; Kilkey 2017; Gibson, Crossland, and Hamilton 2018). In the campaign leading up to the Brexit referendum, anti-immigrant sentiment reached its peak, portraying migrants as undeserving abusers of the British welfare system in an era of austerity. While the deservingness of migrants is usually judged by the majority of the host society, in this article we have attempted to turn the lenses onto the minority instead. We have analysed how the (un)deservingness discourses are echoed by CEE migrants. We have explored how Poles and Lithuanians respond to being categorised into 'good' and 'bad' migrants and how, at times, they try to resist this debate, searching for alternative ways to engage with the belonging discourses.

The use of divisive rhetoric or, what Crowley (1999, 30) calls, 'the dirty work of boundary maintenance', constantly pits migrants against each other. While what many migrants specifically value in the UK is the diversity enabled by ethnic communities formed over the years and presence of migrant communities, they simultaneously take part in the process of distancing themselves from other migrants, doing so in order to prove their own deservingness. Hence, the deservingness debate – marked by often conflated categories of migrants and citizens – entraps them in the constant process of boundary making in the UK. They use and reproduce the language and categories created by the host society to negotiate their position (see also Dhaliwal and Forkert 2015). This leads to the paradoxical situation where the common social currency in the diverse social milieu of the UK all too often hinges upon difference rather than cohesion and a sense of shared belonging.

We argue that the primacy of the deservingness discourse creates a sense of alienation among migrants that prevents them from ever feeling part of the 'community of value' (Anderson 2013). This discourse creates shades of deservingness for those who are rendered legitimate and whose stay is tolerated, and those who do not deserve and whose stay is being questioned discursively and administratively. Yet, even those 'ideal' migrants see themselves as positioned outside of society. No matter how much tax they contribute, how good their language skills might be, how 'integrated' through other markers of the debate, they might, in fact, remain outside of the 'community of value'. In this discursive landscape, one can become a 'good migrant', but by design one can never become part of British society and therefore the claim to belong is denied.

Some migrants have become aware of the poisonous nature of the 'good' and 'bad' categories and actively try to resist them. Some go as far as re-imagining the community of value to point out that, just as 'bad migrants', some members of the host society do not deserve to be included in the community of value either, because they are 'failed citizens' (see also Capdevila and Callaghan 2008; Dhaliwal and Forkert 2015). In doing so, the interviewees blur the boundaries between 'bad migrants' and 'failed citizens' to show the artificiality and fluidity of the categories used in the deservingness debate. Similarly, instead of trying to draw clear-cut boundaries between 'deserving citizens', 'deserving' and 'undeserving migrants', some of the most privileged migrants in terms of education and profession embrace cosmopolitan discourses of inclusivity. In that sense, they tend to challenge the increasing exclusivity that has become the matrix of belonging in the UK, especially after the Brexit referendum. The highly-skilled participants in the study often emphasize the conditionality of their stay in the UK and allegiance to British society, and mention possibilities of relocating to other countries using their EU passports and transferable human capital. Others cope with the fatigue of creating and recreating boundaries between those deserving and undeserving through adopting an intra-migrant solidarity model (e.g. 'the 3 million' campaign).

Brexit has re-invigorated the debates on the conditionality of belonging of people with different migration histories; from post-colonial migrants and their descendants as highlighted by the Windrush scandal (Cummings 2020), to the CEE migrants scapegoated as the 'reason' for Brexit. While the politics of belonging based on structuring hierarchies of deservingness has been present in the UK's political landscape for decades, Brexit debates and atmosphere surrounding it have become a pinnacle of the 'hostile environment' ideology. The latter is underpinned by the processes of 'othering' and the fantasy of

taking control of the borders. The unfolding consequences of Brexit are still to be seen and time will tell whether Brexit caused scars on migrants' sense of belonging will fade. Future research, ideally embracing a longitudinal approach, should examine the extent to which migrants will remain trapped under ongoing pressure of proving their belonging and, to what extent the solidarities forged by the Brexit referendum can empower them to go beyond these imposed categories in long term.

Notes

1. In 2004 Poland and Lithuania (together with other CEE countries) joined the EU, which led to massive out-migration from both countries, in particular to the UK and Ireland, which immediately opened their labour market for new EU citizens. This wave of migration is called 'post-accession' migration.
2. In this article, we refer to our interviewees as "migrants", using an internationally accepted definition of "migrant" as someone who has lived in another country for at least 12 months. We acknowledge, however, that not all of our interviewees use this category when talking about their own experiences and some choose to refer to themselves as "Lithuanians/ Poles living abroad".
3. All the interview excerpts are described in the following way: (pseudonym, gender, nationality: LT for Lithuania and PL for Poland, occupation).

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