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Mobility power in the migration industry: Polish workers' trajectories in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Migration industries are usually researched in terms of the facilitation and control of migration and less attention is paid to how migrants as equally central agents perceive, experience and use the different intermediaries during their migration process. In this article, we examine what the migrant trajectories and lived experiences of Polish workers in the Netherlands tell us about the migration industry as part of the European labour market. In order to understand the Polish workers' position in the migration industry and their mobility power, we take into account the dimensions of work, accommodation and social life. Our study confirms that employment agencies play a crucial role in channelling migrant workers from recruitment to work to accommodation in the Netherlands. This has led both directly and indirectly to spatial clustering and social bubbles where migrant workers work and live together and social contacts mostly take place with fellow nationals. Our analysis of the migrant trajectories also shows multiple mobility processes initiated and owned by the migrant workers through mobility power, revealing how agency evolves in space and over time and changes the positionality of migrant workers within the migration industry.

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Introduction

For decades now, small buses filled with Polish workers have been shuttling back and forth between Poland and the Netherlands. Employment agencies actively recruit mostly young workers from Poland to do flexible and low-skilled work in sectors like food processing, distribution and logistics in the Netherlands. These agencies attract potential workers by offering full-time jobs, good salaries, accommodation, health insurance and daily transport to work. The daily reality, however, is that whereas some workers enjoy acceptable working and housing conditions, others encounter extremely irregular work schedules, unclear salary slips and bad housing conditions with limited or no privacy. Workers rarely see their contracts develop into more structural ones. They might change their employment agencies, get new temporary contracts and move to accommodation elsewhere. Others go back to Poland for a while, but more often than not, they decide on a new work-related venture outside Poland.¹

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The mobility of EU nationals between post-accession states in Central and Eastern Europe and large parts of Western Europe for motives of work is often organised by a well-developed structure of employment agencies and other intermediaries that are involved in the recruitment, employment, transport and housing of migrant workers. Recent studies on migration and mobility have shown how profit-driven actors and activities facilitate, manage and control migration, labelling this as the ‘migration industry’ (Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018; based on Hernández-León 2013; Cranston 2018; Spaan and Hillmann 2013; Nyberg-Sørensen 2012). Migrant trajectories in these studies usually focus on irregular migration from outside the EU (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021; Schwarz 2020; Schapendonk 2018; Spaan and Van Naerssen 2018; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016). The development of a migration industry as part of the European labour market, however, takes place within the context of the regulation on the free movement of workers within the EU (EU Regulation 492/2011). Driven by neoliberalism, the free movement of Europeans is intended to contribute to a competitive and dynamic European economy and is characterised by the flexibilisation and deregulation of the labour market (Jones 2014). The drawback of this form of migration industry is the dependent and vulnerable position of migrant workers in the labour markets of Western European states (Berntsen 2016; McGauran et al. 2016; Maroukis 2015). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has made this even more visible in the Netherlands and other European countries.

Previous research on labour migration from Central and Eastern to Western Europe has mostly focused on the labour dimension in relation to settlement practices by examining migrant types and patterns of labour mobility (Strockmeijer, de Beer, and Dagevos 2019; Nijhoff and Gordano 2017; Engbersen et al. 2013) and migrant strategies (Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Berntsen 2016; Drinkwater and Garapich 2015). This body of literature is in line with a long tradition in migration studies that centres on a ‘departure–movement–arrival–integration’ framework (Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden 2021) and the ‘sedentary lens’ found in policymaking (Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2016). Various studies on migration and mobility, however, demonstrate the importance of moving beyond this focus on settlement practices and the fixity of places (Dahinden 2016). Migrant trajectories are usually not step-by-step planned events; rather, they consist of moments of both mobility and immobility (Schapendonk and Steel 2014). These shifting realities of mobility and immobility question the linear logics of mobility processes (Moret 2020; Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021; Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018; Schapendonk 2018; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016; Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2016; Spaan and Hillmann 2013). Less attention, however, is paid to how migrant workers perceive, experience and use different intermediaries (Franck, Arellano, and Anderson 2018), how their agency and positionality evolve during their migration process (Bell and Domecka 2018) and ‘vis-à-vis actors of the migration industry’ (Schapendonk 2018). Migrant trajectories are influenced not only by mechanisms that facilitate and control human movement *en route*, but also by the decision-making and agency of migrant workers themselves. In this respect, mobility is taken to be ‘a resource that is differentially accessed’ by different actors (Dahinden 2016, 2215).

Following these recent insights, we studied the migrant workers’ perspective through the mobility lens which allowed us to look at the interplay between different forms of movement in relation to labour mobility as well as the social inequalities that are inherent to the migration industry. We examined ‘the dynamics of shaping and being shaped’ (Bell

and Domecka 2018, 866) in the migration industry via the migrant trajectories of Polish workers and their lived experiences regarding not only work but also accommodation, social life and participation in social networks. The aim was to uncover the constraints and opportunities Polish workers experience in the migration industry, how they become labour migrants in the Netherlands and how they move beyond this ascribed or even imposed identity. The main research question was: What do the migrant trajectories and lived experiences of Polish workers in the Netherlands tell us about their mobility power in the context of the migration industry? In the following section, we elaborate on the power and agency of workers in the migration industry via the concept of mobility power. We then describe our data and methods. In the three subsequent sections we present our interviewees' lived experiences with the migration industry in the Netherlands. Subsequently, we relate our findings to the theoretical debate and reflect upon the migrant trajectories and the impact of lived experiences on the debate about the migration industry. Finally, we present our conclusions.

Mobility power of migrant workers in the migration industry

The mobility lens – inspired by the mobilities paradigm (Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2006) – has been recognised in various studies on migrant trajectories (Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden 2021; Schwarz 2020; Van Geel and Mazzucato 2018; Schapendonk and Steel 2014). As Moret (2020) summarises, the mobility lens not only questions the uniqueness and unidirectionality of international migration, but also connects human mobility and immobility to social inequalities. Both notions can be found in relation to the migration industry, where power dynamics and multiple mobility processes come together (Cranston 2018). In the following section, we conceptualise power and agency in the migration industry via the concept of mobility power (Alberti 2014).

A crucial element in studies on migration industries is the power dynamics, which are found in both earlier understandings of how the migration industry facilitates, manages and controls migration (Hernández-León 2013; Spaan and Hillmann 2013; Findlay and McCollum 2013; Nyberg-Sørensen 2012) and later studies that unveil the structures of the migration industry in relation to the positionality of the different actors in space and time and in relation to one another (Cranston, Schapendonk, and Spaan 2018; Schapendonk 2018; Zampoukos et al. 2018; Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2016) – the last-mentioned studies also influencing the mobility power of migrant workers. According to Faist (2014, 45), a system with different brokers, such as the migration industry, contributes to 'complex relations of dependency and power asymmetries between the parties involved'. In the case of labour mobility from Central and Eastern Europe, employment agencies have developed various strategies to make use of – and subsequently even enhance – the flexibility of the labour market. They create pools of flexible workforce (McCollum and Findley 2018; Jones 2014; Pijpers 2010; MacKenzie and Forde 2009) used by companies that buy labour via these intermediaries, and provide temporary contracts to workers to control and maintain labour migration (Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2016). As noted by McCollum and Findley (2018, 559), the industry 'produces "flexible" workers for "flexible" jobs'. Within this context where particular power dynamics in a multi-stakeholder arena are at play, migrant trajectories intersect with the migration industry.

Power dynamics and social inequalities can further be understood by examining the agency and positionality of the migrant workers and their power to shape their own mobilities and immobilities, and in turn their trajectories. Whereas Moret (2020) connects mobility capital to physical mobility across borders, our understanding of mobility power is connected to the accumulation of different resources by migrant workers and their ability to build on them to navigate the migration industry. That is, knowledge, competences, social networks and ambitions influence the mobility power at and 'beyond the workplace' (Alberti 2014). While many studies on labour migration from Central and Eastern Europe focus on the labour dimension of the migrant trajectory (Jancewicz and Markowski 2021; Strockmeijer, de Beer, and Dagevos 2019; Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Berntsen 2016; Nijhoff and Gordano 2017; Drinkwater and Garapich 2015), we distinguish between a labour dimension and a social dimension of mobility power, both of which have their own particular spatial materialisation. Concerning labour, Vickers et al. (2019) note that workers have control over their movement between places across borders and in the destination country, between employers and jobs, and at the workplace. Over time, migrant workers can accumulate a range of resources and use them in different phases of their working lives in response to their labour position (Franck, Arellano, and Anderson 2018; Berntsen 2016; Datta et al. 2007). Adaptation to working conditions can also be considered an expression of agency (Zampoukos et al. 2018). For example, migrant workers sometimes strategically use their job 'in order to gain new skills, enrich their social lives and reproduce their mobility occupationally and transnationally' (Alberti 2014, 866).

The shifting realities of mobility and immobility can further be viewed from the social perspective by taking into account mobility through everyday social practices. Mobility power develops then through individual life courses, personal ambitions, social networking, participation in social life and trans-local connections (see also Van Geel and Mazzucato 2018; Schapendonk et al. 2020). These social facets of daily life influence the social position of migrant workers as they also reflect transnational linkages and the extent to which they orientate to their home country (Knight, Thompson, and Lever 2017). Depending on their socioeconomic status and social position, migrant workers are differently positioned in the flexible labour market of the migration industry (Moret 2020; Zampoukos et al. 2018; Nowicka 2013). This 'transnational social positioning' (Nowicka 2013) matters for understanding the decision-making processes of migrant workers and how the everyday social practices come to effect. The abovementioned take on mobility power – one that includes a labour dimension and a social dimension – formed the theoretical starting point for our study. It allowed us to scrutinise the way migrant workers accumulate and use their resources within the system of the migration industry and how migrant trajectories evolve in space and over time.

Methodological perspective

Context and methods

The two EU enlargement rounds of 2004 and 2007 enabled EU nationals from Central and Eastern Europe to come and perform low-skilled work first in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Norway and later also in Germany and the Netherlands

(Engbersen et al. 2013). Compared to other EU countries, the Netherlands is known for its flexible labour market, with employment agencies having become central agents to accommodate a flexible workforce in the Netherlands (Strockmeijer, de Beer, and Dagevos 2019). This has led to an increase in the number of employment agencies from around 10,000 in 1998 to approximately 14,000 in 2019, among which are numerous agencies that specialise in providing workers from Central and Eastern Europe (Parliamentary document TK 2019–2020, 35 359, 2). The number of migrant workers in the Netherlands has also increased rapidly over the years. In the last ten years, the number of migrant workers² working for an employer in the Dutch province of North-Brabant has tripled, namely from just over 31,000 in 2009 to almost 92,000 in 2018 (Decisio 2017; Van der Haar and Paenen 2020). Almost half of these labour migrants work for employment agencies, two thirds of them earn the minimum wage (<12 euros per hour) and almost three out of four have temporary contracts. More than 42,000 Polish nationals make up the largest group of migrant workers working for an employer in North-Brabant (Van der Haar and Paenen 2020).

This article draws on in-depth interviews with 86 Polish workers (38 men and 48 women) who at the time of the interview lived and most often also worked in the province of North-Brabant. The interviews were part of two larger studies conducted under pre-COVID-19 conditions in 2017 and 2018. The interviewees were approached at Polish supermarkets and various accommodation locations, and through snowballing techniques. In our interviews, which were conducted in Polish, we focused on the lived experiences in the Netherlands concerning work, accommodation and social life. In addition, we used timelines – discussing step by step the trajectory from the moment of moving to the Netherlands until the current situation, including the duration and timing of their stay in the Netherlands related to an employment agency, an employer, the accommodation, the social network or other significant circumstances – to map the decisions and movements of the mobility trajectories (see also Van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). Most interviews took place face to face at a location chosen by the interviewees. A few interviews were conducted via telephone, or in a small group. In addition to the in-depth interviews, we conducted two focus group meetings during which we asked Polish workers to share their stories and reflect on their mutual experiences. All interviews were transcribed, anonymised and analysed. The names used in this article are pseudonyms. As the interviews had a semi-structured form, we organised them according to the three main themes we discussed with the interviewees. We were then able to look for patterns in the opinions and experiences of respondents and apply a selective coding approach for the analysis of the data.

Profile of interviewees

Our interviewees came to the Netherlands from different parts of Poland. About two thirds of them were younger than 30 and many were just beginning their working lives when they arrived in the Netherlands. Three quarters had completed vocational training but only a handful were employed in the sector that corresponded with their diploma. Three out of four interviewees said that their motive for coming to the Netherlands was work related, that is, either to access work or to earn a higher wage than they could in Poland. Most of them had come to the Netherlands alone, but half of them had

relatives or friends who were already working and living in the Netherlands. Many of the interviewees said they had planned to work in the Netherlands for a few months, earn some money and then return; however, two thirds of them had been working in the Netherlands for five or more years (see also Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Nijhoff and Gordano 2017; and Drinkwater and Garapich 2015 on the uncertainty of migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe about how long they plan to stay in the destination country). Half of the interviewees said they had visited Poland two to five times in the previous twelve months; only a handful had travelled back and forth to Poland more than five times in the previous year. These visits to Poland were relatively short and were considered a break from work to visit family and friends, most often at Christmas and Easter as these are important national holidays in Poland. The interviewees performed what are commonly characterised as low-skilled jobs in the Netherlands (see discussion on the social construction of skill in Liu-Farrer, Yeoh, and Baas 2021). Almost half of the interviewees worked for an employment agency at the time of the interview; the others worked for an employer without an intermediary actor. At the time of the interview, three respondents were not working; they were on sick or maternity leave or were receiving unemployment benefits. Somewhat more than half of the interviewees worked at least 40 h per week. Following the timelines of the interviewees, the majority had experienced multiple changes in employment agencies, employers and places of residence in the Netherlands. At the time of the interview, more than half of the interviewees had their own independent dwellings; the others lived in shared accommodation.

Polish workers' trajectories and lived experiences in three phases

In the following section, we present the lived experiences of Polish workers with the migration industry in the Netherlands. In the interview material, we identified three phases of migrant trajectories, each centring on a demarcation point: the first is about the transition to labour migrant (becoming a labour migrant), the second is about living a labour migrant's life (being a labour migrant) and the third is about shaking off this adopted or even imposed identity of labour migrant. We emphasise that 'labour migrant' as a currently used label in policies and the media is not necessarily one that these Polish workers identify with. Yet, we noticed that many of the interviewees shared similar experiences that typically relate to this policy category and the characteristics of the migration industry in the Netherlands.

Becoming a labour migrant: recruitment and arrival

The active cross-border recruitment of workers for low-skilled jobs is quite common, 'directly from abroad, often through employment agencies operating in the communities of origin' (MacKenzie and Forde 2009, 144; see also Jones 2014; Pijpers 2010). This is also the case in the Netherlands, where Dutch and Dutch–Polish employment agencies have developed active strategies to recruit Polish workers. These strategies consist of predominantly active exchanges via online platforms between local recruiters in Poland and potential workers, and 'package deals' offered by the employment agencies. The interviewees said that these package deals, which include registration for a fiscal number, employment, accommodation, health insurance and daily transport to work, were an

important incentive to sign up with an employment agency. About half of the interviewees arrived in the Netherlands through an employment agency. Their experiences upon arrival varied from excitement and satisfaction, to fear, unease and stress. The following two stories capture two diverse experiences with an employment agency.

Kasia, a young woman who had been living in the Netherlands since 2015, looked back at her first contact with an employment agency recruiting Poles for temporary work in the Netherlands. At the time, she had a job at a municipality in Poland; she liked her job but was unhappy with her salary. Out of curiosity, she decided to have a look on Niedziela.nl (a website for Poles in the Netherlands) for job vacancies. Kasia reacted to a job ad on a Sunday and on the following Monday the employment agency contacted her. Her family and friends were surprised when she told them she would be leaving Poland. Kasia felt excited to move to the Netherlands, and despite the cold welcome she received from her housemates upon arrival, she has good memories of her first period in the Netherlands. She was pleased with the employment agency and her work schedules. Initially, Kasia planned to work in the Netherlands for three months but after a while her partner came over and she decided to stay. (Focus group 31 May 2017, Waalwijk)

Ewa, a 32-year-old from Krakow, reflected with rage on her first months in the Netherlands, especially because she continues to notice similar practices that she views as exploitation of Polish workers around her. In 2008, Ewa decided to contact an employment agency to arrange her stay in the Netherlands. Upon arrival, the employment agency seized the passports of the newly arrived workers. Together with the others, she was moved around and housed at different locations in the Netherlands to work in the agricultural and horticultural sectors where workers were needed, before their passports were returned. (Interview 8 May 2017, Waalwijk)

The active recruitment strategies of employment agencies and the structural demand for flexible and low-skilled work from companies that hire personnel via employment agencies accelerate this type of migration. Migrant workers become actors in the migration industry the moment they accept a package deal or make another agreement with an employment agency in the Netherlands. It is relatively easy for young people to obtain a job, as few skills and competences are required; workers often do not need to speak Dutch or have specific work experience. Yet, as we explain below, employment agencies expect a particular work attitude centred on flexibility. This flexibility in combination with low wages, the type of low-skilled work, temporary employment contracts and housing arrangements usually characterises the life of a labour migrant in the Netherlands. The services offered by employment agencies not only reflect the dependent position of workers vis-à-vis an employment agency but also influence the workers' mobilities. Ewa's experience of working for different employers is something that many interviewees still experience today – although different from her first experience in the Netherlands, their passports were not seized. These cyclical forms of job mobility both within the region and beyond were also found by Vickers et al. (2019). In the case of Polish workers in the Netherlands, their geographical mobility is organised by the employment agencies, which match workers with employers.

Despite the active practices of employment agencies to recruit workers in Poland, they are not the only driving force behind people's labour mobility to the Netherlands. Almost half of the interviewees ended up in the Netherlands because of relatives or friends who were already working and living in the Netherlands. Most commonly, these relatives or friends facilitated the first contacts with the employment agency or employer they

worked for in the Netherlands. As such, word of mouth contributes to indirect recruitment by employment agencies. From the interview material, we found that there is no specific gendered pattern, nor a specific family reunification pattern. Both men and women move to the Netherlands for work; sometimes children join their parents, or parents join their children.

Living the labour migrant life

The daily lives of most Polish workers are centred on work; working lives are integrated with accommodation and social life and participation in social networks, which in turn are also very much work related. This is a direct result of the package deals offered by employment agencies and the mentality of the workers, who consider the move to the Netherlands as a work-related and often temporary move rather than as migration.

On the work floor

Most interviewees (except those arriving with a partner, relative or friend) considered employment in the Netherlands an individual undertaking. For that matter, these attitudes towards their actions fit the liquid migration characteristic of an individualised life strategy (Engbersen et al. 2013). Relatively easy access to work and a higher salary than in their home country were the two main reasons for most interviewees to make use of an employment agency. Experiences on the work floor varied, just like the experiences with the employment agencies.

In general, those interviewees who had managed to get permanent contracts with employers said that they experienced less stress than those who had to be extremely flexible in order to obtain working hours. Almost all interviewees, however, said that at some point during their stay in the Netherlands they had found themselves in a situation in which they did not work sufficient hours to cover their accommodation costs. This lack of sufficient working hours to earn a decent living was especially criticised by the workers, as they saw a continuous inflow of new workers that often resulted in internal competition and more hyper-flexibility among the earlier workers. This could be related to some of the strategies employment agencies use to create a pool of workers and to respond to the flexibility of the labour market (see also McCollum and Findley 2018).

The dependent position of workers vis-à-vis employment agencies is most explicit in the package deals (see also McGauran et al. 2016; Maroukis 2015). However, the dependency of the workers on their employers or employment agencies also led to insecurity about the number of working hours and feelings of competition between workers. Ultimately, employment agencies decide which worker is sent to do the job. Karolina's experience illustrates this:

Karolina, a 41-year-old woman who has been living in the Netherlands since 2007, has had her own independent household for some years but was still working for an employment agency – at the time of the interview, in the meat industry, packing meat on a production line. The work is tough not only because of the low temperatures in the refrigerated room but also because the shift schedules of the employment agency cause her stress. She said that on the day of the interview she had been scheduled but the following day she could be sent home, as had happened to her Polish neighbour a few days earlier. She had recently also

noticed that there were more and more young Romanians working. She suspects that Romanians work for a lower wage and accept even worse housing conditions across the border in Germany. (Interview 30 January 2018, Helmond)

At some point in their migrant trajectories, many of the interviewees had challenged bad housing or working conditions, inconsistencies concerning their salaries, or long working hours and the expected flexible work attitude. Few interviewees took judicial steps, for instance about incorrect pay slips or not being paid for overtime. Instead, the majority changed their employment agency or asked the employment agency to send them to another employer. As also found by Berntsen (2016, 481) with regard to migrant workers in construction, '[e]ven though these workers may be conscious and critical of exploitative firm practices, this usually does not translate into directly and overtly challenging these practices'.

Accommodation as part of the package deal

Accommodation is often part of the package deal when working via an employment agency in the Netherlands. Most often, large groups of workers live with fellow nationals in converted office buildings or former hotels, holiday park bungalows or other forms of accommodation. There are shared facilities such as a kitchen, bathroom and sometimes a common room. The bedroom is often shared too, at times with a friend or relative but mostly with a stranger. Moreover, the package deals include particular administrative constructions whereby the employment agencies arrange the payment of wages and payment for the accommodation, health insurance and daily transport to work. The costs were usually automatically deducted from their wages. Interviewees said that it took them a while to understand these administrative constructions, and some also found irregularities in their weekly or monthly statements. Overall, the package deals contribute to a dependency relation, which is strengthened by the fact that many Polish workers did not plan far ahead when applying for a job through an employment agency, did not speak Dutch, or were unaware of the rules and regulations governing the Dutch labour market. In doing so, they can easily become over-dependent on their employment agency.

Many interviewees experienced the package deals as a convenient way to get started in the Netherlands. Those who had been working longer in the Netherlands also noted the downsides of the offered accommodation, related to, for instance, quarrels with the employment agency or their housemates and the housing conditions:

Zofia and Lena, who were both in their early fifties, work in the horticultural sector and have lived in the Netherlands for ten months a year since 2007. They had been using the same employment agency for years but noted that the housing conditions were becoming worse every year. At the time of the interview, they were sharing a room in a previously vacant family home on the edge of a village. The house is damp and being taken over by mould, while their rent has doubled over time. (Interview 22 January 2018, Heusden)

This example of Zofia and Lena challenges the temporality of seasonal work, especially in the agricultural and horticultural sectors. Employers usually address seasonal peaks by hiring workers on a more temporary and circular basis (see also Strockmeijer, de Beer, and Dagevos 2019). Several interviews showed that some migrant workers are engaged in preparations prior to the season and in the clearing and storing of the harvest and

the materials at the end of the season. Thus, seasons in these sectors have become longer, changing the common understanding of seasonal work as something temporal.

The dependency relation regarding housing extends beyond the administrative arrangements as it also impacts the daily mobilities of migrant workers. In some cases, engaging with an employment agency meant working in a certain sector and accommodation in a certain region. For instance, interviewees working in agriculture and horticulture were housed in rural areas. In other cases, employment agencies arranged work in one municipality and housed the workers in another, and provided a car or bus to transport them sometimes considerable distances to the work locations. Overall, accommodation arranged by employment agencies was often situated in small municipalities or on the edge of villages or towns. Due to the location of the housing in remote areas and the work–life rhythm of the workers, there was little interaction with long-term residents (see also Caro et al. 2015; McGauran et al. 2016; Phillips 2010). This influenced the social life of the Polish workers and their participation in the local community.

Social life and limited participation in the local community

Most of our interviewees did not necessarily feel attached to where they worked or lived and did not actively engage in social life in the Netherlands, a phenomenon also reported elsewhere (see for instance Caro et al. 2015; Engbersen et al. 2013). Social life and participation in social networks was mostly with fellow nationals and often online, while participation in the Dutch local community was limited.

Jola, a 52-year-old seasonal worker in the horticultural sector since 2012, said that she felt very much connected to Poland, even though she usually spends up to ten months a year in the Netherlands. She speaks with her family and friends in Poland every day, goes to a Polish church and watches Polish television. Her housemates change on a regular basis but they too are Polish nationals. She and most of her housemates work in greenhouses. Her contacts with Dutch locals are limited. When she tends to her front garden, she engages in some small-talk with her neighbours, and she mentioned that her Polish friend has a Dutch husband. (Interview 17 January 2018, Asten)

These patterns in social life developed in different ways. First, as mentioned, many interviewees ended up in the Netherlands because relatives or friends were already working and living there. Depending on the relationship, this initial social network often remained intact and became part of the social lives of the workers in the Netherlands. Almost all interviewees said that they were in touch with their friends and family in Poland on a daily basis through Skype, WhatsApp, social media and other means. Moreover, for many, Poland had become their holiday destination. These everyday social practices contributed to people's transnational relationships (see also Van Geel and Mazzucato 2018).

While many interviewees experienced a language barrier that prevented them from making new contacts with Dutch locals, only a few had learned or were learning Dutch. Most interviewees said that they did not make an effort to learn Dutch, not only due to a lack of time and means, but also because there was no need to learn it: they worked and lived with fellow nationals, employment agencies had Polish employees manning the front desks, there were a number of online platforms for Polish workers in the Netherlands and there were Polish supermarkets for their daily groceries. They could get by with just some basic knowledge of English. Lastly, many Polish workers said that

they did not make much effort to participate in the local community in the Netherlands, as their aim was to work as many hours as possible. In order to do so, a high level of hyper-flexibility was required, which partly explains why the workers did not actively engage in social and leisure activities. According to Caro et al. (2015, 1615), ‘the workers are focused on working, passing time and getting paid’.

Leaving the labour migrant behind: moving on

Both aspirations and mobilities can change over time, as revealed by the stories of the Polish workers we interviewed. While the initial reason to move to the Netherlands was mostly work related, over time, people learned how the system worked and wanted to work under better conditions without the use of an employment agency, and they no longer accepted bad working and housing conditions. For most interviewees, their mobility power varied from actions related to the labour dimension (see also Franck, Arellano, and Anderson 2018; Zampoukos et al. 2018), such as changing their employment agency and learning Dutch to have a stronger position in the labour market, to steps related to their life course (see also Van Geel and Mazzucato 2018), for example settling practices like family formation or moving to a private living space (an apartment or family home). These practices enabled these workers to move on and leave the migrant industry behind them, thus gaining a stable and more independent position in the Dutch labour market. Basia is an example of this.

Basia was 28 years old and had moved to the Netherlands in 2011 to join her husband and in-laws, who were already living there. She started off with a temporary contract at a large distribution centre, but after two years, she obtained a permanent contract. She enjoyed her work and her colleagues. When her work offered a Dutch language course, she was one of the first to sign up for it. Six years later, she had become a team leader at the distribution centre. She had bought a family house close to work and sends her child to school in the Netherlands. She has Dutch and international friends through work and the school of her children. At the same time, daily contacts with her family in Poland and Polish relatives in the Netherlands keep her connected to Poland. (Interview 21 April 2017, Waalwijk)

Power dynamics and social inequalities vis-à-vis an employment agency can change due to the way migrant workers position themselves (see also Nowicka 2013). A handful of interviewees had learned to cope with hyper-flexibility and to make use of the migration industry because it fitted their family situation. In the case below, Hubert lived a mobile life, moving between his family in Poland and his work in the Netherlands:

Hubert, a 48-year-old man from Opole, started working in the Netherlands in 2009. Unlike many other Polish workers, he made his own plan regarding working in the Netherlands. He has adjusted his work pattern in such a way that he works for eight to ten weeks in the Netherlands, after which he goes back to Poland for roughly four weeks. He is satisfied with this situation, especially as it gives him the opportunity to spend more time with his family than would be possible were he to work long days in Poland, for a lower salary. Because of the flexible labour market, he can easily pick the employment agency that suits his needs. (Interview 26 May 2017, Waalwijk)

Hubert might still be considered a flexible labour migrant, but he has the resources to shape his own mobility and immobility. Hubert and some other workers then ‘strategically use private actors – or, equally important, do not use them – at different moments in

order to achieve particular goals' (Franck, Arellano, and Anderson 2018, 77). Yet, workers' mobility strategies to challenge their unfavourable position in the Dutch labour market and unequal power balance in the migration industry require skills and knowledge that are not evidently and evenly distributed, available or accessible. Workers in these positions are often busy for years surviving on temporary contracts, switching employment agencies and moving from one short-term accommodation to another. While for some of the interviewees mobility power beyond the workplace resulted in upward labour mobility, moving from low-skilled work to skilled work turned out to be rare (see also Aure, Førde, and Magnussen 2018).

Theoretical reflections on migrant workers' mobility power

The migrant trajectories of Polish workers in the Netherlands presented above show that these workers are channelled through different elements of the migration industry and receive a separate label – 'labour migrants' – as a result of their contracts with employment agencies, their spatial isolation and their social environment. In our analysis of migrant workers' experiences in the migration industry in the Netherlands, we identified a structural power imbalance between the different actors, which contributes to spatial clustering and strengthens social bubbles. At the same time, we observed how the agency and positionality of migrant workers evolve in space and over time through individual mobility power. This individual mobility power is usually related to changing aspirations, social practices and knowledge of the Dutch labour market.

Structural power imbalance, spatial clustering and social bubbles

The role of employment agencies in organising and facilitating the recruitment of EU nationals in the Dutch labour market creates a complex dependent relationship between employer and employee and has an impact on multiple life domains of the migrant workers. As such, employment agencies produce social inequalities and a structural power imbalance (see also Faist 2014). As also found by McGauran et al. (2016), the package deals often lack transparency and can easily lead to employment agencies adopting exploitative practices. With regard to work, employment agencies select workers and allocate jobs and working hours to them, continuously creating new migrant labour pools for employers (see also McCollum and Findley 2018; Jones 2014; MacKenzie and Forde 2009). In practice, the package deals put workers in a vulnerable position: they are turned into labour migrants and become dependent on an intermediary that provides the minimum conditions for their stay in the Netherlands – a job and a roof over their heads.

The system of package deals often leads to constraints in labour mobility and daily uncertainty for the workers, in terms not only of work and accommodation, but also of building a social network in the Netherlands. This is closely related to the housing arrangements: employment agencies usually provide accommodation for migrant workers who work only through them. This accommodation is most often in remote areas where only migrant workers stay and is shared with fellow nationals, limiting opportunities to participate in the local community and to expand social networks beyond the work floor and the accommodation. We recognise a form of spatial clustering that strengthens the social bubble of migrant workers, which is already in place as a result

of a strong focus on work and the corresponding work–life rhythm, and the emotional attachment to people left behind in the home country. As a result of daily contacts with relatives and friends back home, the home country orientation remains an essential part of the lived experience of migrant workers, further strengthening the online and offline social bubbles (see also Knight, Thompson, and Lever 2017; Aure, Førde, and Magnussen 2018; Datta et al. 2007). Following the continuous arrival of new migrant workers, spatial clustering and social bubbles remain a continuous part of the migration industry in the Netherlands. Caro et al. (2015) found similar results in their research on posted workers³ in the Netherlands, defining this form of clustering as socio-spatial segregation.

Agency, positionality and mobility power

From the perspective of agency and positionality, workers experienced a lack of control and a lack of privacy both at work and in their private lives, especially in their first period in the Netherlands. With the accumulation of different resources and the ability to build on them, migrant workers strengthened their mobility power to navigate the migration industry. In our study, we distinguished between a labour dimension and a social dimension, in which Polish workers shape their own mobilities and immobilities. With regards to labour, acts of resistance tend to be taken individually rather than collectively, and they are rather pragmatic decisions (see also Berntsen 2016), such as changing employment agency, asking to be sent to another employer or learning Dutch to improve their labour position. At the same time, while cyclical mobility can be considered disempowering for migrant workers (Vickers et al. 2019), we found only a few workers who consciously made use of employment agencies and the possibility of cyclical mobility to adapt their needs. As a result of their knowledge of the Dutch labour market and the role employment agencies play in it, they actually empowered themselves within the migration industry. As Zampoukos et al. (2018) put it: ‘mobility and power, or more precisely empowerment by mobility and mobility as power, becomes intertwined’.

As our study shows, mobility power is related not only to labour but also to social facets of daily life. Especially changing aspirations regarding people’s life courses influenced the decision-making processes of migrant workers. We noticed that, over time, the work-related motive to be in the Netherlands moved into the background and other aspects of life became more important for the migrant workers. For example, interviewees wanted to move to a private living space or had found a partner, started a family or signed up for a language course not only to improve their position in the Dutch labour market but also to be able to participate in the local community. As such, ‘evolvment and process [can occur] even in times of immobility or settlement’ (Schapendonk et al. 2020). By accumulating the necessary resources over time, some interviewees were able to move forward into the next phase of life and leave behind the ‘labour migrant’ label. As noted by Van Geel and Mazzucato (2018), the timing of mobilities matters for a person’s life course. These changing aspirations may be explained by the fact that our interviewees were young and just beginning their working lives when they arrived in the Netherlands.

Conclusion

The Polish workers' trajectories and lived experiences in the different phases of becoming and being a labour migrant, and continuing to bear or leave behind the migrant worker label, portray a well-developed and institutionalised migration industry in the Netherlands that impacts the agency and mobility power of migrant workers. As a result of neo-liberal conditions within the EU (Jones 2014), employment agencies have come to play a crucial role in not only structuring, controlling and maintaining the system, but also channelling migrant workers from recruitment to work to accommodation. In particular, the package deals offered by employment agencies – which comprise such services as registration for a fiscal number, employment, accommodation, health insurance and daily transport to work – characterise the migration industry. What is more, the lived experiences perspective shows how the migration industry creates both directly and indirectly a physical and social community via spatial clustering and social bubbles in which migrant workers work and live together and mostly make face-to-face social contact with fellow nationals or other migrant workers. The lives of migrant workers are most often lived parallel to those of the host society, making them a group that is isolated both in the labour market and in relation to the local community. Most studies on the labour mobility of workers from Central and Eastern Europe focus on the labour dimension (Jancewicz and Markowski 2021; Strockmeijer, de Beer, and Dagevos 2019; Bygnes and Erdal 2017; Berntsen 2016; Nijhoff and Gordano 2017; Drinkwater and Garapich 2015; Engbersen et al. 2013); however, we took a more holistic approach and examined how work, accommodation and the social lives of migrant workers are interrelated and need to be taken into account in understanding migrant trajectories and people's positions in the migration industry.

While the migration industry produces a structural power imbalance in which employment agencies often function as decisive actors in channelling European labour in the Netherlands, migrant workers themselves also actively navigate the labour market and shape their European and local mobility patterns. Our analysis of the migrant trajectories revealed multiple mobility processes initiated and owned by the migrant workers, showing how agency and positionality evolve in space and over time. Our interviews revealed individual mobility power (Alberti 2014) concerning both labour and the social facets of daily life. For the few migrant workers who moved back and forth between Poland and the Netherlands, it concerned cyclical mobility, but for most workers, it was a unidirectional venture with multiple moments of mobility and immobility within the Netherlands. Many of our interviewees had been working in the Netherlands for more than five years and over time had become mobile within certain regions as a result of using specific employment agencies for work, accommodation and commuting facilities, or through changing aspirations related to their life course. As also found by Aure, Førde, and Magnussen (2018), mobility power turned out to be related more to the latter and linked to social facets of daily life rather than to the labour position of the migrant workers. For many workers, over time this contributed to a different positionality within the migration industry, enabling them to eventually leave behind the connotated label 'labour migrant'.

Our study underscores the importance of moving beyond the 'departure–movement–arrival–integration' framework noted by Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden (2021) and

the ‘sedentarist lens’ found in policymaking recognised by Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias (2016). While many studies use the mobility lens to demonstrate mobility and immobility as part of irregular migration into Europe (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021; Schapendonk 2018; Spaan and Van Naerssen 2018; Mainwaring and Brigden 2016), the mobilities approach revealed the dynamics of migrant workers’ trajectories within Europe and as part of the regular European labour market. As found in our study, the migrant trajectories of workers are characterised by multiple mobilities, mostly directed at moving forward in life, initially by finding a temporary job in the Netherlands and subsequently challenging their unfavourable position in the Dutch labour market individually or leaving the migration industry. Interestingly, this group of temporary workers is poorly represented in labour unions or other social movements in the Netherlands (Berntsen 2016). Their voice in the debate about this type of labour market is still marginal and due to the dominantly neoliberal values in the migration industry, it appears difficult for national and local governments to address inconsistencies or to regulate the labour market in the Netherlands – at least before the COVID-19 pandemic, which seems to have accelerated the political and societal debate on the human dimension and equal working and housing conditions. The debate questions the dependent and vulnerable position of migrant workers in the Netherlands as well as in other Western European countries, such as Germany. Consequently, an integrated and long-term policy approach is needed to address the social inequalities and the imbalance in power relations between employment agencies and migrant workers produced by the migration industry.

The impact of the migration industry extends to domains beyond the labour market. It influences the social facets of the daily lives of migrant workers through spatial clustering and social bubbles, and thus potentially pre-structures chances for full participation in the local community for those who organise their lives in the countries in which they work, even though their orientation may continue to be transnational. Policies addressing the social inequalities and a structural power imbalance produced by the migration industry therefore need to also take into account the relation between the work, the accommodation and the social lives of migrant workers. Moreover, further research may provide additional insights into how the presence of migrant workers living in this often parallel world of the migration industry impacts local communities in dimensions ranging from economic and labour market to social cohesion, identity and belonging, and how migrant workers’ experiences in the migration industry impact their post-labour migrant lives.

Notes

1. This reconstruction of mobility patterns is based on our analysis of Polish workers’ trajectories in the Netherlands.
2. In this research, a labour migrant or migrant worker (*arbeidsmigrant*) is an employed person in the Netherlands who was not born in the Netherlands and/or does not have Dutch nationality. The person is not considered a knowledge worker (*kenniswerker*) according to Dutch government regulation based on income (<€18.66 per hour for workers under 30 years old and <€25.45 for workers over 30 years old). The person started working in the Netherlands in 2004 or later (Van der Haar and Paenen 2020).
3. Following the definition used by Caro et al. (2015, 1601): ‘Posted workers move abroad as part of a dependent work relationship with an employer from their home country or from another sending country, rather than moving as individuals to take up or seek a job in the host country’.

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