



# **‘I have no problems because I am white’:**

Understanding immigrants’ wellbeing and  
its relationship with the destination  
population’s attitudes towards immigrants.

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**Abstract**

How do interactions with non-migrants affect immigrants’ wellbeing? Drawing on novel qualitative data for a new immigrant destination (Slovakia), I examine this under-researched question from the immigrants’ perspective. I investigate how their wellbeing is related to contacts with non-migrants and immigrants’ interpretations of non-migrants’ behaviour and attitudes. Using thematic analysis, I explore immigrants’ accounts of the impact of these contacts. First, I demonstrate that different forms of intergroup interaction collectively contribute to immigrants’ wellbeing and need to be studied concurrently. Next, I show that immigrants understand non-migrants’ attitudes and the importance of immigrants’ ethnicity/race and social class for their experience in Slovakia, and how these characteristics hierarchise immigrants in the perception of the Slovak population. Immigrants are forced into roles depending on their position in the hierarchy (e.g., an expat, a spouse of a Slovak, a migrant worker). Third, immigrants consistently feel treated as a part of a group and in their assigned role. Lastly, they feel unable to leave the migrant identity, which forces them to perform the role of a “good migrant”, especially in contact with institutions. My findings speak to existing quantitative research and identify that the mechanism linking migrants’ subjective wellbeing with the destination population’s attitudes/behaviour is the combined extent and character of all immigrants’ social interactions.

**Key words:** subjective wellbeing, immigrants, intergroup contact, attitudes towards immigrants, new destination country, Slovakia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Life satisfaction is an important indicator of integration in the destination country (Crul and Schneider 2010; Houle and Schellenberg 2010; Miller et al. 2020). It is a subjective indicator that provides information about an immigrant individual's own perception of the success of their migration project (Baykara-Krumme and Platt 2018) and it complements objective measures such as income. The salience of immigrants' life satisfaction as a measure of their integration is particularly relevant in new destination countries, where the information about the immigrants' life outcomes is scarcer and where their experience might differ compared to outcomes in the traditional destination, due to the specificity of context (Coşciug 2018).

Immigrants' life satisfaction is clearly influenced by their relations with the destination population as it changes, depending on its extent and non-migrants' attitudes (Sapeha 2015; Šedovič 2023). Despite that, few studies have looked at the relationship between exposure to and contact with the destination population and immigrants' life satisfaction (although see Arpino and de Valk 2018; A.K. Ramos et al. 2017; Kogan, Shen, and Siegert 2018). There is currently limited research exploring how immigrants perceive and experience contacts and exposure to non-migrants, how the effects of these experiences combine, and how and why different forms of contact translate specifically into immigrants' wellbeing. Therefore, this study focuses on immigrants' subjective wellbeing and investigates how it is affected by destination population specifically in new destination countries.

Existing research typically explores the effect of contact or exposure on other migration outcomes such as immigrants' health (Nandi, Luthra, and Benzeval 2020), tests other determinants of life satisfaction such as discrimination (Safi 2010), but rarely tests multiple measures of intergroup interaction simultaneously (Sapeha 2015). Qualitative and mixed-methods research on immigrants' experience is better equipped to explore the combined effect of different forms of contact on immigrants (cf. Pekerti et al. 2020; Hellgren 2018). However,

it often only explores specific populations within migration flows such as students or refugees (Karaman, Schmit, and Can 2022; Khawaja and Hebbani 2019).

This gap is even starker in the countries with lower levels of immigration and new destinations in Europe, as research is more often conducted in traditional destinations in Western Europe and North America (Hellgren 2018; Bynner 2017; Kim 2012; Howe, Heim, and O'Connor 2013; Stevens, Hussein, and Manthorpe 2011). While that can be attributed in part to data availability and the fact that immigrant populations are longstanding in Western Europe, the historical and cultural differences between these countries and newer destinations pose the question as to whether findings are generalisable across the whole of Europe. For instance, many of the Eastern European countries have a short national history as they are newly established (e.g., Czechia, Slovakia, Ukraine) and their previous, socialist, political regimes did not allow immigration or emigration, which can influence locals' attitudes to migration generally.

In this paper, I aim to study the combined impact of different forms of intergroup contact with and exposure to the destination population on the subjective wellbeing of immigrants, drawing on thematic analysis of 50 in-depth interviews with immigrants. I report immigrants' interpretation of their everyday interactions in the destination society and how they do or do not link these interactions to their wellbeing. This study is set in Slovakia, an emerging destination country. Despite the rise in immigration to Eastern Europe there is a little, especially qualitative, research focused on these countries as receiving rather than sending countries (Yalaz and Zapata-Barrero 2018; Rétiová et al. 2021; Rapoš Božič, Synek Rétiová, and Klvaňová 2023). Yet, this region has the potential to show another context of immigrants' integration compared to other European countries given the absence of colonisation or guestworker migration, which shape attitudes and interactions in other settings.

My analysis shows that immigrants in Slovakia feel that they are categorised into a hierarchy depending on their ethnicity/race and social class. The hierarchy determines immigrants' standing in the society and the level of hostility and privilege they experience. Based on this hierarchy, non-migrants assign immigrants roles, which they expect them to perform if they are to be accepted. Immigrants are aware of this hierarchisation and these roles, and interpret the non-migrants' behaviour towards themselves as being based in the attitudes towards immigrants as a group and not themselves personally. In my discussion, I show four mechanisms of how racial hierarchisation and expected roles negatively affect the subjective wellbeing of all immigrants, including those who are most privileged. I show that different forms of contact with and exposure to the destination population affect immigrants' experience in combination and create a hostile or welcoming environment. I argue that it is difficult to disentangle the effects of particular intergroup interactions and therefore they need to be studied simultaneously.

My study advances scholarship in two ways. First, I investigate the environment in a new destination. My results confirm the thesis that a country that lacks experience with immigration presents a different environment for immigrants' integration whether it comes to e.g., institutional support or the destination populations' attitudes (Coşciug 2018). On the other hand, I show that despite the different historical development of the intergroup relationships between the immigrants and the destination population, they are the product of similar principles as in the old destinations, such as racial hierarchisation (Hellgren 2018). To interpret this finding, I borrow the concepts of colonial complicity and the desire to be in the centre, introduced in the Nordic countries, to explain similar development of intergroup relationship (Vuorela 2009). Understanding the Slovak context enhances understanding of immigration in Europe in general. Second, this work contextualises findings from quantitative studies linking immigrants' life satisfaction to their experience with the general population in the destination

country. By interrogating immigrants' own interpretation of exposure to and interactions with non-migrants and showing the importance of the intersection of ethnicity/race and class in their experience, we can better understand the mechanisms behind the differing associations between life satisfaction and non-immigrant attitudes.

## 2. BACKGROUND

An increasing number of scholars argue that subjective wellbeing provides an important indicator of immigrants' integration, illustrating their subjective evaluation of the success of their migration project (Baykara-Krumme and Platt 2018; Hendriks and Bartram 2019; Jenkins 2020). Immigrants' inclusion in the destination country and their perception of such inclusion and acceptance are often linked to their expressed life satisfaction as shown in both quantitative and qualitative research (Houle and Schellenberg 2010; Hellgren 2018; Safi 2010). While the link between discrimination/inclusion and life satisfaction is well-established and the theoretical argument for the importance of measuring integration through life satisfaction is strong, there is a limited body of literature examining *how* immigrants experience their own in/exclusion and *how* they relate it to their wellbeing.

### *Immigrants' relationships with the destination population in quantitative and qualitative studies*

Existing studies often measure the experience of inclusion or discrimination through proxies or immigrants' perceptions of their standing in the destination society. Safi (2010), in her research on thirteen European countries, shows that perceived discrimination explains migrants' lower life satisfaction, while Houle and Schellenberg (2010) state in their research on immigrants in Canada that perceived acceptance is linked positively to life satisfaction. Similarly, Amit (2010) shows that being identified as an Israeli by non-migrant Israelis predicted migrants' higher life satisfaction. Living among the local population and befriending them is shown to also have a positive effect on immigrants' subjective wellbeing (Sapeha 2015). On the other hand, experiencing discrimination has long-lasting negative effects on the feeling of belonging (Crul and Schneider 2010) and on migrants' mental health (Nandi, Luthra, and Benzeval 2020). The destination population's negative attitudes towards immigrants have



also been shown to be detrimental to life satisfaction (Kogan, Shen, and Siegert 2018; Heizmann and Böhnke 2018). Support for anti-immigrant or far-right movements and policies also has a negative effect on immigrants' life satisfaction (Schilling and Stillman 2021; Wiedner, Schaeffer, and Carol 2022; Nandi and Luthra 2021). However, both qualitative and quantitative research has failed to show a link between national migration and integration policies and migrants' feelings of belonging or life satisfaction (Ersanilli and Saharso 2018; Kogan, Shen, and Siegert 2018), which suggests the mechanism behind the link is rather in the exposure to the destination population than in the actual impact of policies.

Quantitative studies research different measures of interaction with the destination culture, such as intergroup friendships, school composition, experience/perception of exclusion/discrimination, proxies of contact (e.g., neighbourhood composition), and other measures of exposure to the destination population (e.g., media, election results, anti-immigrant attitudes). This list of measures is not exhaustive and these measures are not always distinctive and might be measuring multiple dimensions of contact and exposure. For example, neighbourhood composition measures the proximity of groups, the probability of intergroup friendships, or the risk of experiencing discrimination. This lack of precision is also an issue for predefined indices of area heterogeneity (Abascal and Baldassarri 2015). This poses the question – what experiences do we actually capture with these measures and how do we interpret them?

Despite this lack of precision, these could all be considered measures of forms of exposure or contact, whether (in)direct, casual, or para-social (in online space), with non-migrants, and thus intergroup interactions in one form or another. But how do immigrants gain the feeling of acceptance or discrimination and which interactions are more relevant for the construction of these feelings and for immigrants' life satisfaction? Existing quantitative studies do not offer comprehensive analysis of the relative importance or combined effect of

particular ways of experiencing contact with (or exposure to) the destination population and their attitudes towards immigrants. This is the case despite the fact that some of these studies report on multiple forms of interaction, for example neighbourhood composition and intergroup friendships (Sapeha 2015). Moreover, these studies rarely take into account immigrants' behaviour in terms of contact with the destination population, e.g., seeking or avoiding the contact. Some insights on the mechanisms driving the relationship between attitudes and life satisfaction, however, come from qualitative research.

Howe and colleagues (2013), in their mixed-methods research conducted in Scotland, show that when immigrant respondents talk about discrimination and perceived discrimination they cover both general prejudice (e.g., people making fun of a whole ethnic group) and personal experiences, such as, being called names, teased, or feeling like they have to hide a part of themselves. Personal experiences were more strongly related to one's wellbeing and to a negative impact on one's mental health. Conversely, in-depth interviews with former refugees in Australia showed that acculturation and belonging to local communities (such as a church) and a longer stay in the destination are the most important for immigrants' life satisfaction, highlighting the importance of shared interests (Khawaja and Hebbani 2019). More frequent interethnic contact was also shown to promote feelings of belonging in a comparative study of Sweden and Spain; however, Hellgren (2018) points out an existing status hierarchy based on immigrants' ethnicity. Deeper meaningful connection with the local community as a determinant of positive development of mental health and wellbeing was also shown in an international community in Japan (Miller et al. 2020) and among Hispanic immigrants in the US (A.K. Ramos et al. 2017). Multiple studies show that support from non-migrants in the destination, whether in the form of friendship groups or an employer assistance, sustains immigrants' life satisfaction as it reduces stress from acculturation and balances negative experiences (Pekerti et al. 2020; Stevens, Hussein, and Manthorpe 2011). These qualitative and

mixed methods studies shed light on particular forms of contact and mechanisms through which immigrants are affected, and show how varied they are. The examples of positive contact can be assistance with acculturation to the destination culture, or help with bureaucratic demands. A racial hierarchisation of immigrants is an example of a mechanism further affecting contact positively or negatively.

*Theoretical frameworks – multiple perspectives*

Studies of links between immigrant experiences in a destination and their wellbeing and integration are interpreted from a number of perspectives and using a multitude of frameworks. As noted by Hendriks and Bartram (2019, 295), there is an absence of a comprehensive framework in research on the destination environment's effects on immigrants' life outcomes due to its complexity. In this paper, I explore what types of interaction with the destination country, its population and culture immigrants accord importance to and the perceived impact on their wellbeing in the destination country, using the case of Slovakia. I aim to uncover what interactions immigrants consider to be (the most) relevant to their wellbeing and how and why these translate into life satisfaction.

Considering this research aim and the absence of any singular framework within existing literature, I situate my research amongst other empirical studies to assess the similarities and differences between my findings on immigrant integration and those in old immigration destinations. I employ concept of racialised (socio-economic) marginalisation and hierarchisation (Hellgren 2018; Stevens, Hussein, and Manthorpe 2011; Howe, Heim, and O'Connor 2013), as my data show perceived pattern of hierarchisation of immigrants by destination population which create a base of marginalisation of some migrant groups. Further, I use concept of symbolic boundaries (Kogan, Shen, and Siegert 2018; Heizmann and Böhnke 2018; Sapeha 2015; Wiedner, Schaeffer, and Carol 2022; Miller et al. 2020), as the hierarchisation creates the boundaries on which some immigrants gain easier access to and

acceptance in Slovakia as a destination. Finally, I interpret the repeated patterns of racialised profiling and hierarchisation seen in the regions with colonial history through the concept of colonial complicity (Vuorela 2009), which proposes that these patterns became universal and thus other countries tend to subscribe to them to participate on the benefits of existing social order define by colonisation.

I also employ intergroup contact theory (Kim 2012; Hellgren 2018; Pekerti et al. 2020; Allport 1958) and examine if the distinction between positive and negative interactions (Pettigrew and Hewstone 2017) is applicable to the case of Slovakia as it is for other contexts. I examine the impact of contextual, specifically meso, level of intergroup contact (Hewstone 2015). It is a new way to consider intergroup contact. Hewstone (2015) suggests that the face-to-face interactions of individuals create an environment which impacts individuals beyond these specific interactions – a meso-level of interaction. By using immigrants' own accounts of their experiences and focusing on any intergroup interaction(s) an individual considers important, I circumvent the issue of defining what accounts as contact and let the immigrants define it for themselves. Studying different forms of interactions jointly allows, I suggest, for a more comprehensive interpretation of the impact of a destination as a complex context on individual immigrants.

Finally, to interpret the impact of stigmatisation and immigrants' management of interactions with non-immigrants, I employ Goffman's theories of stigmatisation and symbolic interactionism. Stigmatisation is a construction of social categories which are assigned to others based on their individual characteristics, including immigration status, and these categories are assigned potential value or prejudice (Wei, Jacobson López, and Wu 2019). Immigrants, upon understanding the culture in the destination, can use these categories and act according to cultural expectations to manage their social interactions with the destination population (Goffman 1956).

*Slovak context*

Slovakia is a European Union member and since 2007 also a member of the Schengen zone. It is one of several EU countries in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region with a high emigration rate, anti-immigrant attitudes, and, at the same time, growing immigration.

Migration trends in CEE and South-eastern Europe (SEE) have changed, primarily as a result of the EU and Schengen zone enlargements. On top of being primarily (and historically) sending countries, their role has shifted, and they are becoming also destination and transit countries (IMISCOE, 2016). However, existing research primarily considers them as sending countries (Moroşanu et al. 2021; Bynner 2017; Black et al. 2010).

The novel situation of experiencing immigration forces these countries to grapple with challenges, including pressure on policy-making (Coşciug 2018), changes in destination populations' attitudes to immigrants linked to an inflow of foreigners, and changes in the country's demographics and labour market (Hwang and Roehn 2022). Research is needed to understand these challenges, the differences between old and new destinations, how immigration is changing these countries, and what it means to immigrants and local populations there. To properly understand and predict the trends in immigration in the EU and globally, we have to research and understand the new and emerging destinations (Winders 2014).

Previously minimal immigration into Slovakia has changed since enlargement and with the recently improving economic situation in the country. Nevertheless, despite a 36% growth in immigration in the last 10 years, it remains only at a 3.8% (*Slovak Republic* 2021). The largest groups of immigrants (outside Czechia and Hungary) come from Ukraine, Romania, UK, and other EU countries, followed by Belarus and Russia (OECD 2021). The share of immigrants is low compared to other OECD and neighbouring countries (OECD 2022). Slovakia is a young country, established in 1993, which has gone through significant changes in the last 30 years, including the change of regime and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

These historical events are still present in the society and might contribute to more salient boundaries of who does or does not belong. Definitions of nationhood and national identity are still emerging. This may complicate the cultural integration of foreigners. Additionally, the country's approach to belonging is based on the *jus sanguinis* rather than *jus soli* principle, which further impedes easy integration.

Slovakia has a longstanding (labour) emigration history which continues today, although, it plateaued in 2019 (OECD 2022). Emigration still remains at levels considered alarming by the state with approximately 350,000 people in the productive age range emigrating between 2000 and 2015 (Haluš et al. 2017) and the country losing its most-skilled workforce and graduates (Hwang and Roehn 2022; *Country Report Slovakia 2020* 2020). With a population of 5.4 million people the number of emigrants constitute about 9.5% of the labour force, which leads to a labour force gap. Emigration, coupled with the fastest ageing population in the OECD (Dujava and Pécsyová 2020), which further lowers the labour force pool, has led to greater interest in employing third country nationals (TCNs). However, unlike neighbouring countries, Poland and Czechia, Slovakia as a country has no long-term strategies to attract TSNs as migrant workers (Ministerstvo práce 2021; Gallo Krieglerová et al. 2021); there is no collective memory of emigration history that would shape Slovakia's policies to be more pro-migrant (as seen e.g., in Ireland), and Slovakia faces difficulties attracting migrant workers as well as high-skilled foreigners and returning Slovak emigrants (OECD 2022). Yet, Slovaks are reluctant to receive immigrants and hold negative attitudes towards them, as existing studies of non-migrants' attitudes towards immigration show (Gallo Krieglerová et al. 2021; Findor et al. 2021).

Exploring Slovakia and its specific context means developing the understanding of the effects of an anti-migrant government, high emigration, a fragile definition of nationhood, and minimal previous immigration in the destination on immigrants' circumstances. The potential

findings can contribute to our understanding of the immigration and integration in countries with similar settings. Such understanding may increase in significance with the predicted growth of immigrants globally, or at times of unprecedented events, such as the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which might lead to the emergence of other new destinations.

### 3. DATA AND METHODS

I use qualitative data stemming from the *Research of foreigners' integration – barriers, tools and attitudes* project conducted in 2020-2021 by the Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture<sup>1</sup> in Slovakia and funded by the European Commission's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (Gallo Krieglerová et al. 2021). This project collected a range of data from immigrants and non-migrants, including the 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews that are analysed in this paper. These interviews were conducted in 2021 with a diverse range of immigrants of both sexes, and of different nationalities, ages, and socio-economic backgrounds, providing a rich, unique, and extensive quantity of qualitative data for analysis. As part of the research team, I contributed to the design of the interview script and I conducted ten of the interviews.

#### *Interviews and sample*

The interview script was informed by global theoretical and empirical research on wellbeing and integration of immigrants. To the best of my knowledge, these are the first qualitative immigrant data that are focused on immigrants' experience, and specifically wellbeing, in Slovakia.

Interviewees were purposively sampled using the snowball method, starting with immigrants recruited by the research team and through social media. This allowed us to reach different migrant communities, including those not in close contact with the non-migrant population. Additionally, thanks to networks among migrants we circumvented approaching them through gatekeepers such as community or religious leaders as this would limit us to those who gather in formal organisations. The criterion for participation was being a documented immigrant currently living in Slovakia. Asylum seekers and undocumented/irregular immigrants were excluded due to their special circumstances influencing their relationships

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<sup>1</sup> Centrum pre výskum etnicity a kultúry: <http://cvek.sk/en/home/>.



with institutions and their often limited interactions with the destination population. Similarly, individuals who immigrated to the country before Slovakia became an independent country were not sampled as their experience could be influenced by living in the previous regime. However, we did not exclude those who came to Slovakia as asylum seekers if they had subsequently received a visa or (permanent) residency. Immigrants who had naturalised were also included in the sample. The sample aimed to include a wide range of individuals who would represent different types of immigrants. The most prominent difference compared to the overall migrant population in Slovakia is that the sample excludes citizens from Czechia and Hungary. They were excluded as both are neighbouring countries and fellow members of the EEA (unlike neighbouring Ukraine) and have a long history of their citizens living in Slovakia (unlike Poland and Austria). Due to these countries' special relations with Slovakia<sup>2</sup> their citizens cannot be considered as regular migrants.

Before agreeing to the interviews, the interviewees were informed about their purpose and the conditions of participation (anonymity, voluntary participation, recording, transcribing and storing of interviews and data). Interviews were conducted in Slovak, English, Ukrainian, Russian, Serbian, and Romanian, as those are the languages most often spoken by immigrants in Slovakia. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the interviewers. Interviews conducted in Ukrainian, Russian, Serbian and Romanian were translated to Slovak or English. Interviews conducted in Russian, Serbian, and Romanian were conducted by language professionals (translators) trained to conduct research interviews by the research team. These interviewers were themselves members of migrant communities. Other interviews were conducted by the research team members, who were Slovak.<sup>3</sup> The interviews lasted between

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<sup>2</sup> Czechia and Slovakia were part of one state until 1993 and Hungary and Slovakia were part of one state until 1920, with the new borders being contested by Hungary until recently. Hungarians also form a significant autochthonous minority in Slovakia and Slovak Hungarians are motivated by the Hungarian government to change their citizenship to Hungarian.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 for discussion on impact of interviewers' ethnicity and nationality on collected responses.

25 and 135 minutes and averaged 50 minutes. Interviews were conducted at the migrant's place of choice (in a café, in their office/home) or over zoom, if participants did not feel safe to meet in person because of Covid-19 (see Appendix 2 for Considerations and reflexivity).

To protect anonymity, we did not collect information on immigrants' precise age, education, or employment, although interviewees often shared this information throughout the interviews. When quoting respondents in this study, I keep personal information to a minimum to protect their anonymity, while I mention relevant sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., country of origin, ethnicity).

We interviewed 27 women and 23 men. The largest share of the sample (16 people) lived in the capital or Bratislava region. Eight interviewees lived in Košice (the second biggest city) and the Košice region. The rest of the sample were located across the country. The interviewees came from 23 countries, 17 of them from non-EU countries and 5 from EU countries (Table 1). Three respondents came from the UK to live in Slovakia while UK was an EU member state. The sample represents a uniquely diverse selection of immigrants and thus offers a rare opportunity to compare experiences of immigrants coming to the destination from a wide range of environments and for a wide range of reasons.

Table 1: Description of the interviewees based on their age, sex, country of origin, and region of residence.

Characteristics		Number of interviews
Country	Afghanistan	1
	Armenia	1
	Belarus	1
	Brazil	1
	Estonia	1
	India	3
	Iraq	1
	Israel	2
	Italy	2
	Kosovo	1
	Malaysia	1

	Peru	1	
	Philippines	1	
	Romania	5	
	Russia	1	
	Slovenia	1	
	Spain	2	
	Serbia	4	
	South Africa	1	
	United Kingdom	3	
	Ukraine	13	
	USA	1	
	Viet Nam	2	
Region	Bratislava	16	
	Košice	8	
	Žilina and Trenčín	5	
	Trnava	6	
	Prešov	5	
	Banská Bystrica	7	
	Nitra	3	
	Age categories	Up to 25	7
		26 – 40	12
41 – 60		20	
61 +		3	
Not known		8	
Education	Lower secondary or lower	4	
	Upper secondary	12	
	Tertiary	15	
	Not known	19	
Gender	Male	23	
	Female	27	

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Themes explored in the interviews included: perception of the country, Slovaks, and Slovakia's readiness to accept immigrants; feelings of (not) being accepted; past experiences with locals; the individual's identity and opportunities to preserve it; language; following current events and media; relationships – family, locals, other foreigners, own group; wellbeing; COVID-19; experiences with the process of integration, meaning of integration for the respondent and his/her perception of integration expectations in Slovakia; experiences with governmental services and institutions; and meaning of home (see interview script in the Appendix 1).

*Methods*

The data provided rich material regarding numerous aspects of immigrants' lives. However, this analysis focuses on the link between immigrants' life satisfaction and their experience with Slovaks, whether it is direct and personal, in passing or through other channels such as (social) media, communities of foreigners, and institutions. To achieve this, I clustered codes to create themes. The codebook was partially based on the script questions, and partially informed by my initial readings of the interviews. My analysis relies on an abductive analytical approach. This requires strong understanding of underlying theories (immigrants' integration, intergroup contact, subjective wellbeing) followed by reading the interviews and going between qualitative data observation and theorisation (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). My thematic analysis then focuses on themes covering interpretation of the relationship between immigrants' wellbeing and contact/exposure to non-migrants.

My research is not exploratory as my assumptions come from existing research; however, it aims to push the boundaries of knowledge attained in current research by testing it in a new context and developing existing ideas. Specifically, I test existing knowledge about intergroup contact and its impact on immigrants' wellbeing, and examine if current research captures the realities of intergroup contact as it plays out in Slovakia and whether what we already know is found in this context.

#### 4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Based on my analysis of the interviews, I identify a global theme encompassing respondents' experiences as a *Hierarchy of privilege and discrimination* based on the ethno-racial and socioeconomic status of individuals. This is the recurrent element of all themes concerning immigrants' experience with the non-migrant population. The hierarchy seeps into all aspects of migrants' existence in Slovakia, impacts their wellbeing and shapes how they navigate their everyday life.

In this paper I first outline the hierarchy, and then discuss the immigrants' sources of knowledge and level of understanding of the destination population's beliefs and attitudes and how they shape the pressure to perform as a "model immigrant". Finally, I analyse how the hierarchy, attitudes, and the pressure to perform affect immigrants' wellbeing.

##### *Hierarchy of discrimination and privilege*

Respondents, excluding those few who were in a country for a very short time or were isolated due to the COVID pandemic, recognised that their personal circumstances shape their experiences when in contact with non-migrants. The immigrants highlighted the existence of a hierarchy through which Slovaks assess foreigners<sup>4</sup> and decide how to interact with them. While other respondents discussed this issue too, those from the EU, and those who were middle-class and white or light skinned<sup>5</sup> were more vocal in formulating this hierarchy, a fact which I further discuss below. Immigrants' experiences suggest that Slovaks position themselves and their country within a hierarchy and approach differently those who they

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<sup>4</sup> In the Slovak language immigrants are most often called *cudzinci*, which best translates as foreigners. Other terms such as immigrants, migrant/foreign workers, refugees, or expats are also used (see discussion in Findor et al, 2021). I use the terms immigrants and foreigners interchangeably in this article, unless otherwise specified, and use other terms according to the content of interviews.

<sup>5</sup> The categorisation of individuals based on their look and racialisation were thematised in interviews by respondents. Respondents equally described the racialisation of foreigners by Slovaks, who assign categories to others. The descriptions of individuals are based on the content of interviews, e.g., the way respondents describe themselves or report how others describe them, and not my own judgment. Many who in other countries would not be racialised are racialised in Slovakia and cannot always "pass" as white or local.

consider to be above themselves (generally more privileged), at the same level, and those below (generally more discriminated against).

Those more privileged, according to respondents' descriptions, are white, from "western" Global North countries (ideally EU), speak English, are employed or entrepreneurs, middle-class or above, and have a Slovak partner. Some immigrants, but also Slovak discourse regarding foreigners, use the term 'expats' for these immigrants, despite the lack of expatriate history in the Slovak context. Slovaks have different attitudes towards those more privileged and also a different set of expectations – or no expectations – when it comes to integration. For example, they are not expected to learn the Slovak language, like Slovak food, contribute to the economy, or to try to befriend Slovaks. In this hierarchy, according to a Spanish respondent, whose comment sums up a number of observations in the data, those more privileged get a "free pass" while other immigrants are considered a problem even if they try their best. Immigrants in this category are aware of the privileges they enjoy and why, and discussed them openly in interviews, including comparing themselves to other immigrants:

"I was a bad teacher but they hired me anyways. I don't have to work, so I can observe and don't have to function as a full-scale member of community."  
(respondent from the US).

"As a British person not in Bratislava I have been very welcome. My experience depends on where I come from." (respondent from the UK).

"My advantage is that I am English, people want to chat with me to use their English. They wouldn't want to talk to me if I was Spanish or French." (respondent from the UK).

Those who are considered roughly equal to Slovaks are usually from other EU countries and their race plays a role in this perceived evaluation. Their immigration and integration into Slovakia is easy from the legal perspective due to their European citizenship and they can pass as Slovak in everyday life, so they are not regularly exposed to negative reactions to themselves. Many respondents pointed out privileges that come from their high-earning jobs, which signal to Slovaks that they are not coming to "steal jobs" or "abuse the social system"

and push them into the “expat” category in peoples’ understanding. Some of these respondents speak about discrimination and xenophobia directed at foreigners, and even differentiate between xenophobia and racism. They point out that they are doing well in the destination because of how they look (skin colour, religion) and suggest that negative experiences of immigrants with the destination population are based on racism and/or colourism.

“I have no problems because I am white. On another occasion I don’t have a problem because I am from the EU.” (respondent from Estonia).

“I am not discriminated. Slovenia is the EU. I even think that for Slovaks when I say I am from Slovenia it is like ‘wow’ reaction from them.” (respondent from Slovenia).

The mentions of skin colour are frequent in the dataset as is its link to immigrants’ experiences, which speaks of its importance in the society and, as a consequence, for the integration of non-white foreigners. This integration penalty for non-white immigrants is also observed in other European countries (Sobolewska, Galandini, and Lessard-Phillips 2016).

Lastly, those who are from countries considered as below Slovakia in the hierarchy, or too different from Slovakia, are those who more frequently described experiences of perceived discrimination or taking active steps to avoid it. Those with negative personal experiences are immigrants of visibly different ethnicity. A respondent from southeast Asia spoke about being orientalised and being welcomed in a community of Slovaks because they “are exotic.” A couple of respondents said they cannot recall a problematic encounter with Slovaks, some even said they have very good relationships with everybody. At the same time, they explain, they avoid certain places (e.g., particular neighbourhoods, bars) or people on the street or public transport:

“I have never experienced directly any sort of discrimination on the basis of my colour and ethnicity, not even once. ... But I take precautions. I'm not outside in the middle of the night in certain places. I don't say that you shouldn't be, okay? But then anything can happen anywhere. So you see, the point is that one needs to exercise restraint and responsibilities.” (respondent from India)

When asked to elaborate on the safety measures they exercise, immigrants with such habits did not recognise their behaviour as safety measures and were puzzled by the question. They could not tell how they knew what and who to avoid. When asked about whether this limits them in their everyday life, they described their behaviour as normal. These respondents also had knowledge of discriminatory behaviour towards their foreign friends or colleagues. Their behaviour is comparable with the behaviour of other groups exposed to threats who share practices focused on protecting them from risks (Aksoy and Gambetta 2016).

Muslim and dark-skinned immigrants mentioned the experience of being refused entrance to restaurants and bars on a regular basis. One black respondent says he often feels like he is looking over his shoulder in Slovakia even though he personally did not have a negative experience. A respondent from Afghanistan had problems securing an apartment for his family when he tried to both rent a place and buy a place. This respondent explicitly talks about racism and discrimination based on his origin:

“They ask you ‘Why are you here, why are you still here?’, even though I am here for long time, still they are questioning us, why are we not going anywhere else. Now this is a home for me, why should I go anywhere else? They ask those questions even though I have citizenship here.” (respondent from Afghanistan)

This particular account shows the different level of expectation and acceptance. The respondents from the privileged group felt welcomed no matter the level of their integration or attempts at integrating. However, this respondent shows commitment in his learning of the language (which is a condition to receive citizenship), and is still exposed to a hostile environment and reactions to his presence in the country.

This experience with buying a house also shows that while the other two groups further differentiate based on their socioeconomic status, in the case of the last group, the ethno-racial origin is more important in the eyes of the destination population. Another respondent also offered an observation of the relationships between Slovaks and immigrants experiencing more discrimination:



“I mean, you can see in the street how people look at foreigners. Like you don’t see a group of mixed like Arabic and Slovak people. So I know that these people might have like tons of money, but because of the colour of their skin, they are not in that group. There is like no violence, no physical violence, no verbal abuse. No, I haven’t seen these. It’s more, subtle. You know, you see the groups...” (respondent from Spain).

The interviewees disclosed information about negative experiences in the second half of the interview, often after declaring that they have positive experiences in the country. They discussed the negative experiences as an issue that is not linked to them personally, but to immigrants in general. Besides the hostility and discrimination immigrants experience themselves, almost all of the respondents reported witnessing or knowing of other immigrants having a negative experience with hostility and discrimination. However, a limited number of them acknowledged this as a systematic problem and/or expressed concerns for themselves. The recognition of discrimination against others and not against oneself means some immigrants do not experience it (which would be expected considering the racial hierarchisation), but it can also be seen as a sign of victimisation avoidance used as a coping technique often observed among those experiencing discrimination.

Immigrants with a higher socioeconomic status reported hostility towards others more often than those with blue collar jobs or lower educational status. The economically less privileged respondents often put the blame for the negative experience on (immigrant) victims and their behaviour: “well, that happens to you if you go to a night club”, or apologised for the behaviour of the majority population: “they [colleagues] called me Rumunka [a Romanian female] but I liked it, they didn’t mean nothing bad.” These accounts demonstrate the inequality in the treatment of immigrants and their different levels of recognition of discrimination and racism. Moreover, they show how an individual’s race/ethnicity and social (and economic) status intersect and shape how immigrants are perceived by non-migrants, how they interpret these encounters, and thus how interactions between immigrants and the destination population are shaped by this inequality.

When respondents who do not have personal experience with discrimination talk about their friends' stories, they point out the differences in nationality or ethnicity between themselves and their friends. A white British migrant explains:

“My colleagues from Africa experienced negative behaviour, not physical attack, but people were glaring at them. I talked about it with Slovak colleagues and I don't think it happened because of racism, people are just curious, they are not used to dark-skinned people. But I also have a Brazilian friend who was physically attacked.”

Immigrants observing discrimination against others are often themselves in positions of power in the destination and enjoy privileges that come with their status. These statements pass judgment on both the destination population and other immigrants, and might be affected by the privileged respondents' origin. For example, an English respondent might be reading the situation also from their perspective of a white person from a country with relatively high immigration and a longstanding black population.

These qualitative data allow us to understand the variability reported by the quantitative research and its roots, and to see the importance of an intersectional perspective, especially the intersection of ethnicity and socio-economic status (Bonnet et al. 2015), to understand how inequality can interact and how the impact on wellbeing, whether positive or negative, can be multiplied. The racialised hierarchy intersecting with class described by immigrants in Slovakia is comparable with patterns of discrimination uncovered in Western European countries (Hellgren 2018) and suggests that destination populations across Europe share an approach to foreigners rooted in the (post)colonial hierarchy and racism/colourism (Vuorela 2009).

The observations and descriptions of the experiences of others also raise a question as to whether immigrants are able and willing to disclose information about problematic experiences in destinations, if the information is collected in another form. This might be due to individuals' unwillingness to discuss the topic, but also due to what seems to be a disassociation from the experiences of discrimination immigrants had themselves (e.g.,

apologising for it, downplaying it), an issue I observed in the data repeatedly. These interpretations are shared among immigrants and are one of the sources of information on which immigrants build their understanding of Slovakia and Slovaks, (whether these sources are correct or not).

### *Understanding and interpretation of Slovaks' attitudes and behaviour*

The intergroup contact between Slovaks and immigrants is informed not only by non-migrant attitudes towards outgroups but also vice versa. Immigrants' sources of information for understanding Slovaks are varied. Some come from direct interactions but not all. This is because not all immigrants are in everyday touch with non-migrants in the form of having friends, or colleagues. But all of them had some experience with Slovaks and even those who do not speak the language or struggle with interpreting the behaviour of locals during their casual encounters, have an opinion on Slovaks, their (anti-)migrant attitudes, behaviour, or the country in general, which they gained through mediated contact with the destination population. This further confirms that direct contact, whether close or casual, is not necessarily the most important or exclusive way that immigrants interact with and learn about the destination country population, and it confirms the thesis that a meso-level of contact might be an important avenue to explore in intergroup contact (Hewstone 2015). The interviews with immigrants who do not speak the language or did not for a long time, those who came to the country during the pandemic and whose socialisation was limited, and those who are living in their own communities, show other channels of contact and exposure.

Those immigrants who do not speak Slovak (very well) say they do not understand Slovaks, but not only on the linguistic level. A respondent from Latin America explained an incident in a bank: "I don't think she discriminated against me, but I am not 100% sure."

Another respondent concluded that she only understood that Slovaks working in services were not rude to her particularly, but just not pleasant in general, when her language skills improved.

However, despite ambiguous interpretations of Slovaks' behaviour even these respondents had ideas about Slovaks' attitudes which they gained through their co-ethnics, other migrant communities, limited contact (e.g., through work, or rental agreements), through institutions and services (most importantly health services and the foreign police), and through (social) media.

Immigrants meet with other migrants outside of their own ethnic groups and influence each other, especially in the online space. These are the platforms where the image of a Slovak person as an individual, as a group, and as a state/nation is constructed, moulded, and (re)invented. Individuals can and do promote trust or mistrust in Slovaks in general and in specific groups, inform about institutions and their employees, or in general look out for fellow immigrants. While direct contact with Slovaks can shape immigrants' opinions positively and negatively, and partially influence their life satisfaction in particular dimensions, immigrants rely on multiple sources of information. As an Israeli migrant explains below, their experience is different to that of other immigrants, but they mention both when asked about their experience:

“So what I get from other people [foreigners] on Facebook is that Slovakia is a closed country and not really tolerant towards foreigners and foreigners get a lot of rejection... But we had positive experience so far.”

Local media does not appear to play a role in understanding the context of the country for the majority of immigrants. They prefer international media, because of the language barrier or transnational links, even years after migrating. Others do not consider what is in the media as important. Finally, about a third of respondents sees media content as important, even if anti-immigrant rhetoric is dismissed as populist and thus unlikely to be fulfilled. This was especially true for European immigrants, who experience(d) similar political discourse in their

countries. Political discourse equally did not receive a strong recognition in the interviews as migrants' source of information about Slovakia and Slovaks' attitudes.

Lastly, the state and its institutions are another source of information. Immigrants, especially from third countries, link the behaviour of individuals with the approach of the state. Discrimination and racism are also evident on the state level. According to one respondent, the approach of the state is "that if people want to come, they will and they will figure out what they need to". A European respondent speaking Slovak agrees. He explained that he is getting good treatment from the foreign police, because he understands what to do and how it goes. He, however, remembered instances of discrimination and abuse of power directed at Muslim immigrants who did not understand the procedures when in a foreign police office. This treatment seems to be in line with the national immigration and integration policies of a state, which were described by multiple respondents as being "not interested in us, not offering services. It makes sense when their policy is not to encourage immigration". A Ukrainian respondent compared Slovakia unfavourably to Poland: "the state doesn't have a blue card like in Poland or a policy what to do with migrants". Another, speaking about different private migration agencies, says she "would like to feel more protected [as a migrant]. To know who I can approach [if there is a problem]." These experiences with institutions directly affect immigrants' wellbeing as institutional discrimination (or neglect) is source of stress and anxiety. Considering these respondents are labour migrants from outside the EU, this aligns with the findings regarding the hierarchy of immigrants.

This also accords with migration experts' opinions criticising the state publication, *Migration Policy of Slovak Republic until 2025* (Ministerstvo práce 2021). This 15-page document is vague, does not state any criteria regarding the management of migration, nor a specific institution responsible for it (Gallo Krieglerová et al. 2021). The approach of the state is to limit the number of arrivals, and does not advance the understanding of immigration

among the local population. It misses a chance to gradually change the environment to a more welcoming one, considering the established need for (labour) migration. And these negative attitudes are then experienced by the most vulnerable already-established immigrants.

All of these sources of information (direct interactions, other immigrants, social networks, media, politics, institutions) cumulatively build up individuals' understanding of the destination and their place in the society, which is dependent on the existing hierarchy of privilege. This then shapes their further experience with Slovaks. Therefore, all these sources of information are mechanisms through which Slovaks' attitudes impact immigrants' wellbeing.

### *Performing a role*

The hierarchy and expectations put a lot of pressure on immigrants beyond what is commonly recognised as discriminatory treatment. In general, the most important expectations of Slovaks are for immigrants to learn the language, follow rules, be polite and “behave”. The expression ‘to behave’ was an often repeated one and respondents said they see it as condescending as it means not only integrating in life in Slovakia, but assimilating the culture and forgetting one's own. The success in fulfilling the expectations shapes the interactions of an immigrant with non-migrants.

While these are general expectations, immigrants agree that Slovaks have specific expectations when it comes to particular immigrants, depending on their origin. All the different types of immigrants in Slovakia, including the most privileged ones, feel like they have a prescribed way of how to live, and what reasons they should have to move to the country. This pressure shapes individual immigrants' behaviour to perform in a certain way, to be a *model immigrant*. Otherwise, they or their fellow immigrants might experience negative consequences.

One Romanian immigrant did not want to disclose to her co-workers her economic situation, her type of car and apartment, because they were more expensive than the co-workers expected, and she was afraid of their reaction. Hiding a part of an individual's life or identity is described also by Howe, Heim, and O'Connor (2013) as a coping mechanism in the face of adversity. Multiple Ukrainian respondents said Slovaks do not want to talk to them about "big topics", they do not think Ukrainians can be interested in art, politics, or history. One of them explained that it was hurtful to be told that she should not be involved in Slovak politics, in "our things", by a Slovak. Some immigrants, who came to Slovakia with their non-Slovak partners, say it is unusual for Slovaks to see, for example, a British couple being interested in living in Slovakia. They expect western Europeans to come only if they follow their Slovak spouses and are suspicious of unexpected behaviour and constantly question why a foreign couple would choose to live in Slovakia. A Serbian respondent concludes that Slovaks are just not interested in foreigners and are constantly surprised by their ability to keep up with local politics or events. Slovaks also "don't understand somebody could see an opportunity here, like the place, or just come to explore."

The need to perform a certain role, and the fear of stepping out of that one prescribed role fitting the person Slovaks expect an immigrant to be, shows how strongly the contact with non-migrant culture shapes individuals' experience and their wellbeing. For example, the Romanian immigrant's experience of withholding the information about her economic situation suggests that a better economic situation that should lead to higher wellbeing can in fact be a source of stress.

Despite the hierarchy that they recognise, respondents complain that, when talking about immigrants, the Slovak population, institutions, and politicians do not care about differentiating between immigrants and do not see them as a varied group of people. This trend of "putting everybody in the same bin", as one respondent called it, is problematic as it does

not allow immigrants to be perceived as individuals. It further pushes them to perform the prescribed roles instead of showing their individualities and fulfilling their potential. One respondent explained:

A: "Personally, I want to try to be a good image of a foreigner. I try to make Slovaks say 'look, he's a foreigner so foreigners are ok, they're friendly.' So I wouldn't do something to upset people. Obviously, my humour is different to Slovak humour. So maybe my jokes do not go down as well as they would in Australia or England. But I'm not gonna do something anti-social, like get drunk and shout and scream. I'd like to be a good person and let local people think 'oh, foreigners are ok.' " (respondent from South Africa).

Q: "It seems like a lot of responsibility."

A: "Why not? I think it's quite nice to be a presentable foreigner so I could make people think foreigners should be accepted, they are nice, friendly people trying to fit in."

This impact of interactions in a complex social network on immigrants' understanding of the culture (in the destination) and through that on their behaviour could be interpreted through the concept of symbolic interactionism. Immigrants, upon understanding the expectation they face, adapt their behaviour in social interactions to correspond and recreate the culture in the destination to impress others and avoid embarrassment (Goffman 1956).

### *Wellbeing*

It was rare for respondents to link their experiences with non-migrants, whether bad or good, with their life satisfaction directly. The exception were those individuals who experienced the most serious types of discrimination and racism, for example on the labour or housing market: "Personally, it [discrimination] affects me [negatively], but it also affects other foreigners...". However, many spoke about the effect on their feelings (e.g., "hurtful", "unbelievable", "feel insecure"), when talking about positive and negative experiences, even mentioning the strength of the effect those encounters had on them. The way respondents link experiences with their internal thoughts and processes are emotional and complex. Whether immigrants mention their wellbeing explicitly or implicitly, is not necessarily important. It is important that their



wellbeing is negatively affected. Happiness is the driver of migration and barriers to achieving its growth have merit for the immigrant experience and thus it is necessary to study them (Hendriks and Bartram 2019).

When respondents were asked about their wellbeing, the factors they identified as influencing their wellbeing varied and depended on the reasons why the immigrants came to the country and their ability to fulfil these reasons (e.g., employment, family, safety). The majority of the immigrants explained that their satisfaction comes from their confidence in living in the country thanks to understanding it, which further shows the need for acceptance from non-migrants and explains why immigrants follow paths that are expected from them in the destination, even if these might not be the ones they would choose themselves.

Theoretical papers and empirical research suggest that the wellbeing of immigrants is greater during the period immediately following arrival, which is attributed to excitement or improved conditions compared to sending countries (Bartram 2015; Kóczán 2016). With time, the assessment of one's own wellbeing goes down, depending on how happy an immigrant is with their own migration project. My qualitative data, however, speaks to another pattern of wellbeing evolution, whereby higher life satisfaction develops after some time spent in the destination. This is similar to the results of other qualitative studies (Khawaja and Hebbani 2019).

Immigrants who experienced more discrimination or those more isolated from the Slovak population, explain that it took them a long time to feel happy in Slovakia. A direct contact or friendships with locals are only some of the factors listed as important for immigrants' satisfaction. However, most of the factors that immigrants identify as important are linked to a welcoming environment and interactions with locals. To solve administrative issues and learn the language one needs a (relatively) positive experience with state institutions and support in learning the language. To learn about the culture and feel as a part of a

community one needs to create relationships with locals. Thus, these activities are dependent on contact, as it guides and enables them. In this instance my findings align with findings from other contexts such as Australia and the UK, where positive contact in an educational setting and with supportive employers are shown to improve immigrants' life outcomes (Stevens, Hussein, and Manthorpe 2011; Pekerti et al. 2020).

Overall, my data tells a story of a complex interplay of contacts with the destination population defined by a racialised hierarchy, intercultural (and linguistic) understanding, and expectations, which affect immigrants' subjective wellbeing in combination. These accounts of how immigrants navigate life in the destination country help to explain *how* and *why* interactions with the destination population are linked to immigrants' wellbeing .

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study I set out to understand *how* intergroup interactions between immigrants and non-migrants affect immigrants' subjective wellbeing. Employing qualitative interview data, my thematic analysis shows how immigrants experience and interpret their engagement with the destination population. In this section I discuss four mechanisms behind the effect of these intergroup interactions on immigrants' wellbeing and discuss the specific context of Slovakia as a new destination.

My analysis demonstrates that contacts between immigrants and non-migrants are varied and that there is no clear cut notion of what immigrants count as a contact. I argue that particular types of experiences e.g., relationships with neighbours or interactions with institutions, collectively contribute to the development of immigrants' wellbeing instead of one them being its singular driver. Current research, nevertheless, typically examines different types of exposure independently using particular theoretical frameworks (e.g., multiple discrepancies theory, neighbourhood theory) and data (Kim 2012; Wiedner, Schaeffer, and Carol 2022). My findings corroborate the importance of these particular types of contact; however, the data from immigrants' accounts also suggest that as different contacts are experienced jointly they produce the impact of the whole destination context. This suggests that these different types of exposure also need to be studied simultaneously.

I identify four main mechanisms, which link immigrants' subjective wellbeing and contact with the destination population and culture, based on my analysis. All four are rooted in the hierarchy of privilege and discrimination. First, the hierarchy itself is linked with a lower wellbeing as it sorts immigrants into categories, which prescribe them different worth as individuals (Wei, Jacobson López, and Wu 2019). This categorisation hurts those of a 'lower value' as it is clear from my data that immigrants are aware of the hierarchisation. Second, the hierarchy affects the life satisfaction of all immigrants as it takes away individuals' choices.

While being a part of a collective way of doing things may not necessarily be a negative experience, my data shows immigrants feel forced into roles they would not take up otherwise. Immigrants perform these roles to be able to live and integrate themselves into the society as ‘good migrants’ (Goffman 1956). Third, immigrants feel that they will be punished if they act outside of the prescribed roles, whether out of choice or necessity. Finally, the hierarchy shapes the contact between state institutions and immigrants, who are dependent on them, as state institutions also do not treat immigrants equally and invest very little in assisting with their integration. These four mechanisms point out the importance of employing an intersectional perspective in the study of immigrants’ outcomes in the destination, as the intersection of ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and origin country contribute to the immigrants’ experience in the destination.

My study supports previous findings regarding the importance of class and race in immigrants’ integration (Hellgren 2018; Bonnet et al. 2015) and intergroup interactions that lead to or limit that integration (Pekerti et al. 2020; A. Ramos et al. 2019; Houle and Schellenberg 2010). I have demonstrated that most of the interactions between an immigrant and non-migrants are rooted in the hierarchy of privilege and prejudice that non-migrants are seen to create and endorse depending on their preferences over immigrants’ origin and characteristics. While the idea of a hierarchy among immigrants based on the non-migrant preferred origin of immigrants is not novel (e.g., Sobolewska, Galandini, and Lessard-Phillips 2016), in my research I show that immigrants are aware of these hierarchies and present how this theoretical concept translates into the everyday life of immigrants and directly and indirectly influences their subjective wellbeing and integration.

Third, my research also serves as a case study of immigrants’ experience in a new destination country. I show that their experience is dependent on their origin and affected by class and racial marginalisation, which is comparable to migrants’ experiences in other

European countries with longer a immigration history such as Spain, Sweden, the UK, or the Netherlands (Sobolewska, Galandini, and Lessard-Phillips 2016; Hellgren 2018; Vuorela 2009). However, immigrants in Slovakia are more susceptible to encountering issues with the state institutions, which are inexperienced due to the small migrant inflow and weak policies regarding immigration and integration. This is a surprising finding as Slovakia's historical development is not comparable with these countries. The current experience of immigrants in Slovakia can be compared with the early diversification in Western Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, immigrants today are arriving under different circumstances. It might suggest that a destination can adopt attitudes towards immigrants and conform in their treatment to 'standards' seen in other countries, independent of its particular context.

Slovakia is a good example of a Central/Eastern European country and may reflect trends in neighbouring states. This paper also presents a very broad dataset of immigrant interviewees regarding their origin and thus offers the varied experience of individuals of different backgrounds and with different motivations to migrate (see Appendix 2 for the discussion of the dataset limitations). While surveys can shows us patterns, I demonstrate that these qualitative interviews can help explain the variation in the experience of immigrants as seen in survey data.

My study provides novel information about the integration of immigrants in a new destination country and describes how social interactions between immigrants and non-migrants impact immigrants' life satisfaction. Using qualitative data and immigrants' own accounts of their perceptions and interactions, this in-depth data contributes to a comprehensive understanding of immigrants' life outcomes in an understanding but potentially informative, given its contrasting history compared to older immigration contexts, case.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix 1 – interview script*

**An introduction:** How did you get to Slovakia? What was your journey?

#### **1. Slovakia and foreigners**

##### **1A) Perceived hostility/welcoming environment of the non-migrants society to foreigners**

- How would you describe Slovakia? What kind of country is it? What is the first thing that comes to mind when somebody says "Slovakia"?
- When you think about locals in Slovakia, what type of people is more welcoming to migrants? Do you have any personal experience or examples? And now, what type of people is more hostile/closed off to foreigners/immigrants?
- Do you think Slovakia is ready to accept more immigrants coming to the country? Why do you think so?
- What do you think about the political discourse about migration and immigrants/foreigners? What do you think about what politicians say about immigrants?

##### **1B) Feeling of being accepted/being an outsider**

- Have you ever felt like an outsider in Slovakia? If yes, could you describe any specific situation when you felt like that? If not, what do you think is the reason? Would you say it changes in time when you think about how locals see and treat you? If yes, why do you think it is happening?
- Now, thinking about the feeling of being accepted in Slovakia, can you describe when did you/do you feel accepted in Slovakia or by Slovaks (e.g., in the community/neighbourhood, the city/town where you live, at work, in general)? Would you say this is how you always felt or is the feeling of being accepted changing in time?

##### **1C) Your experience with the behaviour of members of majority/Slovaks towards you**

- What are your experiences with Slovaks? Have you ever experienced any adverse reaction from people around you because you are a foreigner? Could you tell me more about this experience? Whose reaction was it? What were the circumstances? What was your reaction?
- Has this ever happened to somebody you know?
- When you think about your experiences with locals/Slovaks, are they changing in time, for example, when you compare these days and the time when you first arrived in the country? If yes, what would you say is the reason (e.g., locals perceive you differently, the country is changing, you are changing ...)?

##### **1D) Immigrant's own identity – its importance and possibilities to preserve it**

- Are any customs and traditions in your country different from those in Slovakia? Can you give me an example? How important is it for you to preserve them? Can you do that in Slovakia? If yes, are you doing it? If not, why? And is it a problem for you?
- Which language do you speak at home or in your community? Is it important for you to speak your mother tongue? Have you ever experienced any reaction from others when using your mother tongue/language other than Slovak?

## **2. Integration in the society**

### **2A) Following current events in Slovakia**

- Do you usually follow news about current events in general? Do you follow news specifically about political and social events in Slovakia? If yes, how often? To what extent is it important for you to follow political and social events in Slovakia?
- Where do you usually get news about political and social events in Slovakia?
- If you want to follow what is happening in Slovakia, do you think you have enough options to do that? Is there any information you're missing/can't get?

### **2B) Relationships with other people, participation in different groups**

- Now I'd like to ask you about your relationships, people you are in touch with, and acquaintances in Slovakia. When you think about the people you meet regularly, who are they? Who are your colleagues, classmates, and neighbours?
- Who are the people you spend time with most often when away from home/family? Are they foreigners, Slovaks?
- Do you meet your colleagues in your free time? Can you tell me who they are? Are they foreigners, Slovaks?
- (If not spending time with Slovaks) Why do you think you are not spending time with locals/Slovaks? Would you say it is important to be in touch with Slovaks when you live here? Would you like to have more links with them? If yes, what are the barriers?
- Are you a member of any communities, societies, or clubs (does not have to be official)? Can you tell me more about them? Who are the people you are meeting there?

## **3. Wellbeing**

### **3A) Satisfaction with life in Slovakia**

- When you think about your life, how satisfied are you with how things are going in general? And more specifically, how happy are you with particular aspects of your life (e.g., work, living situation, relationship, health, anything else the respondent wants to refer on)?
- Is there anything you'd like to change about your life or any of its aspects? If yes, what would that be? Why? Is such a change possible/realistic? Why yes/no?
- When you think about your country of origin (or another country you used to live in), would you say you are more or less satisfied/happy in Slovakia than you were there? Why do you think you are more/less satisfied here?
- When you think about the time you arrived in Slovakia, would you say you are more or less satisfied with your life now than then? Why is it so?

### **3B) COVID-19 impact on one's life satisfaction**

- When you think about the last year, how did COVID-19 and the restrictions it brought affect your life? And what about your life satisfaction? Are you more or less satisfied/happy?
- And how was your life affected when you think about your everyday activities? For example, when dealing with governmental offices and authorities? When doing activities, which help you integrate into Slovakia (if relevant)? Did it affect your work/your chances of finding a job? Your education/Slovak language course?

#### **4. Perceived Slovaks'/locals' expectations from migrants – opinions**

##### **4A) Perceived expectations in integration**

- An often-repeated opinion about foreigners in Slovakia is that they have to assimilate/adapt to be accepted in the society/by Slovaks. Would you agree with that? What do you think Slovaks expect from foreigners when they say that foreigners should adapt/assimilate? Do you remember a situation when something (specific) was expected from you personally? Can you tell me about this experience?

##### **4B) How realistic are these expectations**

- When you think about Slovaks' expectations of foreigners, would you say they are realistic? Can a foreigner fulfil them? How can a foreigner learn about the expectations locals have?

#### **5. Experience with the process of integration**

##### **5A) Opinion about integration**

- What do you think about when somebody says integration? What does this term mean to you? Are you integrating into Slovak society? What or who is helping you in this process (the most)? And how?
- What does a foreigner need when they come to a new country? Would you say that you are getting that in Slovakia?

##### **5B) Opinion about discrimination/disadvantage**

- Would you say that you, as a foreigner, are disadvantaged compared to the destination country's population (Slovaks)? If yes, how? In what aspects? Could you give me an example of a specific situation or experience when you felt disadvantaged/discriminated against? (follow up with a question about particular aspects of life – labour market, health care, housing, education (of children), availability of social services, etc.)

##### **5C) Experience with governmental offices and authorities**

- What are your general experiences dealing with governmental offices and/or authorities when you needed to get something done? Can you describe to me your best and worst experiences? When you go to any government office to get something done, what usually helps you manage it successfully? And what is usually the most significant barrier you face when dealing with Slovak authorities/offices? In general, what would you say works well and what does not?

##### **5D) Availability of the integration services**

- In many countries, specific services are available to foreigners for free to help them integrate (e.g., labour market consultations, assistance with housing, language courses, translators available in governmental offices, etc.). Are there any services like this in Slovakia? (If yes) Which ones? Do you have any personal experience with them? Can you tell me more about it? What do you think about such services in Slovakia in general - Are they adequate, is there enough information about them, and are they available in a language you speak/understand? What could be improved in this regard?

- (If these services are not available in Slovakia) What do you usually do when you need help navigating certain situations (e.g., dealing with authorities)?
- Do you have previous experience from another country with available services for foreigners, which you'd like to see in Slovakia? (If yes) Can you tell me more about them?

## **6. Closing questions**

### **6A) Meaning of home**

- What does home mean to you? Do you feel at home in Slovakia? (If yes) What makes you feel like that/helps you feel like that? (If not) Why not?

### **6B) Feeling at home in Slovakia**

- What would help you feel (more) at home in Slovakia?

## *Appendix 2 – Considerations and reflexivity*

The sample size means that the data collected are not representative. However, the purposively chosen sample included a wide range of immigrants who came to Slovakia for varied reasons and voiced different experiences, which showed in the collected data. Thus, the dataset is informative for the Slovak context and can be informative also for similar contexts.

The evidence relies on self-reporting and, therefore, must acknowledge the impact of social desirability, sensitivity, and bias in respondents' answers. However, the inclusion of a wide range of interviewers, the use of languages most often spoken by immigrants (hired interviewers underwent rigorous training), and the inclusion of migrant interviewers and interviewers with migrant experience or multi-national identity might mitigate this bias. Respondents' answers were detailed, and the lack of differences in detailed descriptions between respondents interviewed by Slovak and non-Slovak interviewers, including when talking about negative experiences, suggests respondents felt comfortable answering questions in interviews. While the research design calculated with working with languages most often spoken by immigrants in Slovakia and with English, there is still a possibility some migrant groups did not have a chance to participate due to the language barrier. Similarly, the team of

interviewers was predominantly female (9 out of 10 members), which might have prevented some people from agreeing to be interviewed or might be reflected in the study results.

This project was conceptualised and led by Slovak research team and funded by the European commission, with this particular study conducted by a (migrant) researcher situated in an institution in London. To mitigate the creation of an extractive research as well as to prevent insider influence bias, the research team included Slovaks, immigrants and Slovaks with their own migration experience.

Due to the pandemic, the research design underwent some changes, especially in the data collection order and inclusion of distance interviewing using online platforms. On average, there were no differences in interviews conducted in person and online regarding the length or information provided.