



# Securitising the future: Dystopian migration discourses in Poland and the Czech Republic

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a comparative study carried out in Poland and the Czech Republic, which analysed the societal attitudes towards migration and migrants in Europe. Our research shows that the reaction to migration in Poland and the Czech Republic constitutes a reversed (bottom up) securitisation. Moreover, contrary to the majority of security challenges where the immediate threats are understood to be more dangerous than those placed in a distant future, when it comes to securitised migration, the threat projection increases the further into the future it is cast, and immediacy loses its potency as a catalyst. Societal discourses on migration foresee a dismal future which becomes more and more dystopian with the passing time.

## 1. Introduction

Movement belongs to the fundamental ontological theories essential both from the perspective of human history (Castles et al., 2009) and the human future. It is generally accepted that freedom of movement is a determinant and, at the same time, a condition for the dynamic development of human communities, just as on the other hand, incumbent, long-term settlement, and inability or reluctance to move are sometimes regarded as symptoms of stagnant and hindered development.

In the last decade, we witnessed increased migration flows from the Middle East and Africa; the vast majority of these migrants headed for Europe. In 2015, when this wave of migration peaked, the topic of migration was one of the most salient triggers that had the power to divide whole societies and dominated the public debate for quite an extended period. As data from various sources show (Meltzer et al., 2017), European attitudes towards migration were rather negative. However, there are some differences between the “old” and “new” parts of the European Union (EU) (Bandelj & Gibson, 2020; Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Vieten & Poynting, 2016). In our paper, we look specifically at Central and Eastern Europe to analyze the societal attitudes towards migration and migrants outside of the historically grounded “Kodak moment” of here and now, which is prevalent for the majority of scholarship on migration. On the contrary, we focus on how people in Poland and the Czech Republic (Czechia) understand and see migrants in the context of the future. By exploring how the visions of a future society have been formulated in the societal discourses on migration in Poland and Czechia, we identify the forecasts made with regard to this phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

To tackle this research puzzle, we used the concept of securitized migration (Aalberg et al., 2012; Citrin & Sides, 2008; Esses et al.,

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that our research predates the current war-induced migration from Ukraine to Poland and the Czech Republic.

2017; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Sniderman et al., 2004) as a springboard for our theorizing through which we developed our main argument. Building on the existing literature, we refine the conceptualization of securitized migration by incorporating the temporal dimension, which provides a bigger picture of the phenomenon.

Our research shows that the reaction to migration in Poland and the Czech Republic constitutes a reversed (bottom-up) securitization. Specifically, racist anxieties about how populations will ‘change’ are projected into the future as racialized migrants are not yet established there. This reveals the relation between anxieties about migration and the anxieties about race.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, contrary to the majority of security challenges where immediate threats are understood to be more dangerous than those expected in the distant future when it comes to securitized migration, the threat projection (exacerbated by both the elites and media) increases the further into the future it is cast. We conclude that the societal narratives on migration are forecasts, which make neither truth nor explanatory claims, and therefore can be classified as dystopias (Bergman et al., 2010). While these ‘speculative imaginations’ (Slaughter, 1998, p. 30) do not pretend to be accurate or bother to offer compelling explanations as to the “whys?” of the envisioned scenarios, they foresee a dismal future. Our findings are based on a series of focus groups carried out in both countries.

In what follows, we discuss how migration can be understood through the lens of securitization theory. This theoretical frame is supplemented with a description of our study’s methodological design. Lastly, a case study is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings.

## 2. Securitizing the future

Security can be understood as a phenomenon not solely evident from a material distribution of power but as a socially constructed phenomenon existing within social structures (positions of authority), whereby those in power convince their audience that there is something to be feared (a threat that must be affectively recognized, internalized, and responded to). This approach, which has become important in security theory, places heavy emphasis on society as the focal point of security concerns. One of the fundamental assumptions is that the state and the society “of the same people” are two different things (Buzan et al., 1990, p. 119), with the latter able to reproduce itself independently of the state and even in opposition to it. More importantly, with respect to the argument presented here, a lack of societal security also enhances the discrepancy between the state and the society or, more precisely, between the society and the political elites. This is understandable when one considers that the elites and the general public pursue different logics, with the elites more closely linked to the state and the public to the society (Wæver et al., 1993). Elites are both compartmentalized and stratified, which means that they can be divided into different groups (e.g., political, economic, cultural or intellectual elites) and form distinctive networks on different levels (for detailed overview see Bartoszewicz, 2019a). Similarly, the public is far from monolithic either. At the same time, it demonstrates a unified belonging expressed through the willingness to defend itself against internal or external threats. However, Watson observes (2009, p. 19) that there is no consensus on how political collectives come to view themselves as threatened due to varying perceptions of similar external circumstances. For this reason, he believes that when it comes to political collectivities such as societies insecurity cannot simply be reduced to subjectively held feelings but should be based on considerations how threats are intersubjectively established through argumentation and persuasion. This angle also reflects how social reality is contingent on how ordinary people think and talk about security (Van Rythoven, 2015).

Within the societal security frame, we use the theory of securitization, which provides insight into the influence of security issues in state policy-making (Buzan et al., 1998). The theory suggests that a security issue passes over time from non-politicization to politicization to securitization (Balzacq, 2011; Emmers, 2013). At first, the non-political issue moves into the public policy field, to be securitized when framed as a threat that requires extraordinary measures, breaking classical political rules (Bartoszewicz, 2016). The theory consists of several constituent elements: referent object, securitizing actor, securitizing move, and an audience. A referent object is a specific entity that experiences an existential threat but must survive at any cost. A classic example is a state whose territorial integrity is under attack. The existential threat is the securitization trigger. Securitizing actors are those individuals or factions able to raise an alarm or, in the theory’s terminology, perform a securitizing move. This is usually made via what Stritzel (2014), p. 23) calls “a particular grammar of security,” i.e., public speech acts addressed to an audience. However, a security speech act does not constitute a securitization; it only represents an attempt to present an issue as a security threat (Bourbeau, 2011, p. 45). The last element plays a critical role: the audience is supposed to agree or disagree with the securitizing actors (most often, politicians) that the referent object is endangered and permit or reject the imposition of extraordinary measures. Thus, the co-dependency of agency and context (Balzacq 2011; Lenz-Raymann, 2014) is captured by the mutual constitution of the plausibility of the proposed future. A consensus or controversy between a securitizing actor and the audience influences the securitization results because the structure of securitization depends on the correlation between the elements.

It is, therefore, evident that the concept of securitization is concentrated on the relationship between the securitizing actor and the audience. Classic studies of the securitization process show that it usually has a top-down structure whereby the political elites initiate the process, and the society is a passive receiver (Bartoszewicz, 2019b). However, this dynamic can be challenged and reversed when the audience performs securitizing moves and strongly influences elite securitizing actors. Bourbeau (2011) suggests that the prevalent understanding of the role of the audience is misleading because it approaches the sequence of the securitization process in a unidirectional fashion in which the audience stands only at the very end and does not incorporate the possibility of feedback and multi-directionality between securitizing agents and audiences that are at the core of the securitization. Against this focus on audiences’ mere

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this idea to our attention.

“approval” capability, Bourbeau puts forward a constructivist approach that acknowledges the polymorphous character of power by problematizing the enabling and/or constraining influence of contextual factors such as the mass or popular audience, which in his view could induce securitization by enabling the securitizing actor to make security speech acts. The role reversal means that the security initiative moves to the audience (Bartoszewicz, 2021). The elite’s ability to influence or change the process is weak, and the securitizing actors “at the top” remain under pressure to accept the audience’s vision of the security problem. In this case, the audience can either influence the traditional securitizing actors or securitize the issue by itself in a struggle against the elites. To put it bluntly, the audience seizes the securitizing initiative.

We claim that the reaction to migration issue in Poland and the Czech Republic constitutes a reversed (bottom-up) securitization whereby society securitizes specific issues (e.g., mass immigration, Islamisation, an increase in foreigners or *Überfremdung*, European integration) and become the agents of securitization. In our approach, the audience (society) is considered an active agent, initiating securitization dynamics via evident dystopian narratives augmented by the media to which politicians can (but do not have to) respond to, feed off of, and only then reinforce and cultivate the societal hype so that the securitized becomes the new normal, the new mainstream policy option. And indeed, it seems that it is exactly what happened in Central Europe: A significant number of far right and mainstream political parties responded to the call of the public opinion and followed the “will of the crowd” to be in line with their voters’ attitudes (see the concept of tactical populism discussed by Ormrod & Henneberg, 2010). In other words, they used the opportunity and included nationalism into their daily communication. As a consequence, xenophobia and perhaps racism became part of the mainstream (of the new “normal”) in the V4 countries (Stojarová, 2018; conf. “everyday racism” in the works of Essed, 2002).

The second and more critical refinement to the existing theory refers to the aspect of threat projection. The temporal dimension is inextricably tied to a dynamic of threats and connected with the sense of urgency (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 12) brought about by the *now*. Threats that are encroaching on the now are somehow generally understood to be more dangerous than those referring to some distant future. In a canonical definition, Ullman (1983) writes that a threat “is an action or sequence of events that threatens drastically and over a relatively brief span of time [emphasis added] to degrade the quality of life for the inhabitants of a state.” Initially, according to Williams (2007), discussing threats in material terms was meant to enable a reasoned discourse around them. Broadening and deepening the field, scholars have focused on including non-physical threats into the inventory of perils and encapsulating as broad a range of non-military dangers to humans as possible (Bain, 2006; Hough et al., 2015), rather than considering temporal stretching to account for possible future threats faced by individuals and communities.

Usually, regardless whether conceived as normative threats (Creppell, 2011) or traditional physical dangers, both internal and external risks gain prominence with increased immediacy. In other words, the closer and more pervasive the threat is temporally, the more serious a danger it represents. Interestingly, in the context of securitized migration, immediacy loses its potency as a catalyst. On the contrary, the evident dystopian narratives indicate that when the danger is removed in time, it only enhances the gravity of the issue. This counter-intuitive securitization of the future is highly peculiar, rendering migration very interesting, if not unique, in this regard.

Outside of crises, migration is a slow onset phenomenon embedded in a continuously evolving socio-cultural milieu. In its temporal dynamics, migration is inherently future-oriented. Hence, consequences of migration temporalities offer important insights that might be gleaned from reflecting on the security vulnerabilities that underpin them. We argue that for the societal audience, while the threat of migration does not originate from a specific place (Dal Lago & Palidda, 2010, p. 105) and is both material and normative, its perilousness only increases with time – in contrast to the majority of other conventional dangers. Paradoxically, where migration is concerned, the further into the future, the more severe the issue becomes. This threat perception is based on the belief that Eastern Europe is “behind” its Western counterparts (Hagen, 2003). Such a perspective positions the region in the core-peripheries hieratic relationship with the Western member states of the European Union. The fate of the “imitative peripheries” East encapsulates, thus, the copycat post-1989 modernization efforts accepted by the majority of the region’s elites after the fall of communism. This reveals another dimension of the “return to Europe” project, encompassing not only the adoption of the Western governance style and economic rules and membership in Western institutions but also a return to a shared European future. The need to “catch up” to the West both politically, economically but also in socio-cultural terms means that the Western Europe “present” becomes in this projection a proof of the future threat that Eastern Europe will inevitably face.

### 3. Research design and methodology: phenomenology of the future

Social constructivism set this perimeter of our research centered around not so much ontology and inquiry into what is reality but epistemology and the question of how we interpret reality. The experience becomes a (socially) shared story that can be shared with others. This key role in the interpretation of meanings makes human tales, stories, narratives - or ways of understanding reality - the primary area of analysis amounting to a “narrative turn” in political sciences. However, while it is through narratives that people make sense in a chaotic stream of experience, they are not an alternative to truth or reality but rather to the way in which this truth or reality is presented. To understand the dynamics behind the societal approach to migration in both countries, we conducted a series of Focus Group Interviews (FGIs). This method, relying on group dynamics, allowed us to examine the attitudes and – at least partially – understand the perspectives, constructions, notions, and interpretations of migration among Czech and Polish citizens albeit without sanctioning it.

In total, we organized eight focus groups (four in the Czech Republic and four in Poland<sup>3</sup>). Our respondents did not know the exact topic of our research. All of them were recruited by their age (younger vs. older respondents) and residence (big city vs. small cities/villages). We also controlled for their education - all of them had either secondary or higher education. However, we deliberately decided not to control for gender (even though the groups were relatively balanced in terms of gender composition) and their initial attitudes toward migration. While we are aware of the gendered variance in migration discourses (Pessar & Mahler, 2003), the reason for that was our effort to rely on partially randomised “natural groups of people.” Our approach to recruitment has paid off as all the discussions were dynamic and vibrant. In all the groups, supporters and opponents of accepting migrants met, and the structure of interactions of our respondents resembled those in the public/media/political sphere. Therefore, our decision to work with semi-heterogeneous groups of respondents brought us solid results. Also, the number of sessions was more than sufficient; a pattern in the respondents’ thinking emerged almost immediately, as suggested by the literature on the subject (Guest et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2019). We reached narrative saturation after the second session in both countries; the meaning saturation, however, was achieved a little bit later, but no later than after the third session.

Each focus group consisted of six to eight respondents and was led by a professional moderator who followed a script covering various aspects of perceptions of migration and related issues: the general image of a migrant in various contexts (moral, security, economic, cultural), their personal experiences with migrants, and last but not least their perception of media coverage of migration and political responses to challenges posed by migration. A few projective techniques were part of the session; however, in some cases, they did not work well. For example, we prompted our respondents to draw a migrant or a symbol of migration, but they refused to do it (they said they could not draw) and used words instead. After this situation was repeated in the first two focus groups, we decided to drop this task altogether. The duration of each focus group meeting was roughly 90 min, and the discussions were recorded for subsequent critical narrative<sup>4</sup> analysis. While phenomenology is interested in how people experience phenomena in a specific context and time (how they perceive and talk about them), “rather than describing the phenomenon according to a predefined categorial, conceptual, and scientific criteria” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 362), critical analysis allows to make the position of the researcher more explicit.

In this paper, we cite the translated statements of the respondents; these are in quotation marks and marked with the number of the interview they come from: W1-W4 for Poland and B1-B4 for the Czech Republic, whereby W1/B1 corresponds to young responders (<25 years old) living outside Warsaw/Brno; W2/B2 corresponds to young responders (<25 years old) living in Warsaw/Brno; W3/B3 denotes older responders (26 + years old) living outside Warsaw/Brno; and W4/B4 indicates older responders (26 + years old) living in Warsaw/Brno. It should be emphasized that due to the qualitative nature of the research, the findings are not representative, and the conclusions cannot be reasonably extended to the entire population in Poland and the Czech Republic. The qualifiers used in the analysis, such as “the majority of respondents” or “a small proportion of respondents,” are only descriptive and indicative. Most importantly, instead of annotated paraphrases, in harmony with narrative phenomenology, preference is given to quote at length in order to let the interviewees speak for themselves in an attempt to avoid the inadvertent changes in the meaning of their words or infusing them with our interpretations and impressions, creating a “patchwork” with quotations taken out of context. Thus, the paper offers a bifocal approach as it firstly provides the view of the world through the eyes of the very same individual who is the subject of the subsequent analysis.

#### 4. Case study: Societal migration discourses in Poland and the Czech Republic

The whole Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region has rich experience with immigration, and the Czech Republic and Poland are no exception (IOM, 2020). However, migration has long been associated rather negatively with brain drain and a significant loss in the local demographic, economic and cultural sectors (Glorius, 2018). While some researchers (Stola, 1998) predicted that after EU accession, they would gradually change from being a source of migrants to a transit country and finally become an immigration destination, that never really happened. To this day, both countries remain remarkably homogenous in terms of ethnic, religious, and other minorities (Bara et al., 2013; Czech Statistical Office, 2018; European Commission, 2018; Statistics Poland, 2020). The numbers of refugees accepted in both countries since the crisis are summarised in Table 1. This fact is very important for understanding the attitudes that most of our respondents, and we will return to it later in the discussion.

However, before we present and discuss our findings, it is useful to provide at least a crude commentary on the baseline situation in relation to migration in both countries. The 2015 migration crisis in Poland and the Czech Republic was not characterized by a vast number of incoming refugees crossing the border or applying for protection in those countries. Instead, similarly to the other Visegrad

<sup>3</sup> In Poland, the research took place on 20–21 November 2019, and on 3 and 14 February 2020 in the Czech Republic.

<sup>4</sup> To analyze the collected material, we used Critical Narrative Analysis, based on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur: With the hermeneutic of trust, the researcher recreates and reconstructs meaning - demystifies it through empathic engagement in the process of discovering meaning through the fusion of the horizons (researcher and the researched). This hermeneutic assumes respect for the author of the text, whose story is justified in the process of understanding. Secondly, the hermeneutic of suspicion is the process of demystifying significance, searching for it under the surface of the text since it is never directly given and transparent in this process. Here “the task of the researcher is to reach the hidden sense, sometimes assuming quite radical assumptions, for example, that the significance of the sentence can only be attained through symbolic interpretation” (Soroko, 2007, p. 201). Finally, the critique of the illusions of the subject accounts for the possible mistake in the process of discovering (and in principle, appropriating) the meaning recognizing this action as a form of subjectivity in which the scholar reflects their subjectivity to the text so that the perspective of the researcher dominates the perspective of the text itself.

**Table 1**  
Number of accepted refugees in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Refugee acceptances: number of people	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Poland <sup>a</sup>	1074	11 285 <sup>b</sup>	4 430	3 835	3 769	2647	7 252
Czech Republic	2564	4885	4360 <sup>c</sup>	2186 <sup>d</sup>	2054 or 1 922 <sup>e</sup>	1959 <sup>f</sup>	1354

<sup>a</sup> Border Guard Headquarters (pol. Komenda Główna Straży Granicznej), Informacja Statystyczna za 2021, <https://strazgraniczna.pl/download/1/27269/InformacjaStatystyczna2021r.pdf>

<sup>b</sup> Country Report: Poland, The Asylum Information Database, [https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AIDA-PL\\_2020update.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AIDA-PL_2020update.pdf)

<sup>c</sup> Czech Republic, 2021, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/czech-republic#statistics-data>,

<sup>d</sup> COUNTRY REPORT IMMIGRATION DETENTION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: “WE WILL NOT ACCEPT EVEN ONE MORE REFUGEE, 2018, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Immigration-Detention-in-the-Czech-Republic-December-2018-Web.pdf>

<sup>e</sup> <https://www.mvcr.cz/migrace/soubor/zprava-o-situaci-v-oblasti-migrace-a-integrace-cizincu-na-uzemi-ceske-republiky-v-roce-2019.aspx>

<sup>f</sup> Czech Republic Refugee Statistics 1991–20 222 022, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/CZE/czech-republic/refugee-statistics>

4 countries (Hungary and Slovakia), the crisis was primarily felt in the meta sphere of public debates, media coverage and later in the political discourse as well. In each country, the primary response heavily focused on the securitization of the issue, with considerable criticism directed against the obligatory distribution scheme put forward by the EU and Germany and calls to reject them. Neither Poland nor Czechia fulfilled its commitment invoking the right of member states to refuse relocation to individuals that pose a threat to public order and internal security. At the same time, in both countries anti-immigration movements (e.g., Konfederacja and the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party, respectively) gained a new foothold, and anti-immigration rhetoric became normalized in political debates. Simultaneously, radical right and most of the mainstream parties as well added a new component into their already well-established populism - nationalism (Stojárová, 2018). Emphasis on patriotism, the need for (national) unity and protection of our cultural and national heritage became part of their everyday vocabulary. Consequently, xenophobia and perhaps racism were mainstreamed as well.

The media coverage of the “migration crisis” corresponded to this: the majority of the most read media chose a negative framing and migration was portrayed as a “wave that could sweep us away.” The focus was on several basic frames, however the most negative were those focusing on security, cultural and economic (for a detailed analysis of Czech media see Pospěch & Jurečková, 2019; for the Polish one Troszyński & El-Ghamari, 2022). Subsequently, societal attitudes toward migrants and refugees increasingly trend in a negative direction (Brožová et al., 2018; Laciak et al., 2018), which created a sort of vicious circle. Although the frightening scenarios of refugees flooding the Czech Republic and Poland were not fulfilled, and the numbers of refugees coming to the Czech Republic have remained low since 2015, the popular imagination still cast vivid projections as to the possible migration-induced futures. And it seems that the more information the public had, the more negative their attitudes became, and the more extreme were the attitudes of the political elites. Alternatively, the more migration was talked about, the more the public grew apathetic. However, this did not lead to an improvement in the perception of migrants - on the contrary. Stereotypes and prejudices triggered by the “otherness” of the migrants were intensely present in the assessment of the whole situation.

Though superficially paradoxical, this observation is congruent with our securitization argument. Most accounts assign a central role to the media in promoting an alarmist message and turning the audience into fearful, even brainwashed, subjects (Furedi, 2018, pp. 10–11). On the contrary, Furedi (2018) shows that how people think, behave and fear is not a direct result of media consumption. Whereas the media plays a significant role in cultivating fears by providing a constantly evolving script how to experience and react to threats, direct experience, personal circumstance, social context and emotional dispositions lead to differentiated responses. Thus, media is not an omnipotent variable when it comes to threat construction and framing, because these are in the first place underpinned by culture. This reinforces our claim concerning bottom-up securitization and societal agency.

#### 4.1. Findings

Our respondents were very clearly aware of media contribution to the securitized migration image. It is undeniably visible in how the respondents speak first about issues that are beyond their personal experience. Sometimes uncertainty was caused by too much information; especially young respondents accused the media and politicians of exaggerating (*Bad news is good news [B3]*) or making it impossible to know what to believe. Contradictory sentiments were also reflected in the belief that the media both exaggerate and are simultaneously censored. The latter was, however, a widespread belief among the older respondents who also criticized the vocabulary pertaining to migration discourse, blaming forced political correctness for the fact that the media do not tell the truth either to lower or to ramp up the fears: *They publish only things that people can bear. If they published everything that is going on there [in Germany...it is censored. It's because they want to lower our fears (B4)*. Alternatively: *People are afraid of new things in general. Here is the aim of the media and the politicians – their goal is to raise manipulative fear (B1)*. Indeed, some politicians have regularly used the topic as a tool to activate their supporters and in more than one case the topic of migration has become an election campaign issue (e.g., in Czechia in 2017 parliamentary elections, and 2018 presidential elections). Respondents were aware of this fact and mentioned it as an easy tool to gain political points and attention: *Occasionally something comes up when the government has to deal with something, so they have to define themselves sharply in order to score political points (B2)*.

Not far into the interviews, it became apparent that migration presents not only an economic but also a moral dilemma. This was



evident in how the respondents in both countries maintained a strict and consistent differentiation between economic and other migrants. Simultaneously, for the majority of the respondents, the need to prevent migration, i.e., the desire instead to give aid in migrants' homelands (*we can help them there, not bring them to us [W1]*) was balanced with a readiness to help people in need (*Sure, we should offer them help [give jobs] [B2]*). Again, two opposite tendencies were apparent: the help was very conditional, very often temporary, and contingent on hard work and integration: *When someone seeks a better life, they integrate/adapt themselves (B1)*. Or as another respondent put it: *If only educated people would migrate and would work here, there is no reason for not helping them. If it will be only those who will look for benefits and will not show any effort to integrate, then I would disagree (B4)*. Nevertheless, some interviewees also exhibited palpable scepticism about the impact of (rare) positive examples that, according to the respondents in both countries, tended to be the exception rather than the rule: *Who migrates? Do we talk about those who really need something? OK, we can help them. However, I haven't seen such migrants. Fellas should stay at home and fight; those who should migrate are women and children (B4)*.

Nevertheless, migration as a cultural issue understood in terms of a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1991) was perceived as the most "real," especially in the context of migrants of Muslim origin, who, according to some respondents, are not able to integrate. These were rarely seen as uninformed victims of smugglers or people in need of political asylum. Thus, in addition to the economic vs. non-economic migrants, the second qualifier appeared differentiating the Muslim from the non-Muslim: *For example, [when] Ukrainians are here, it is OK because we are culturally close, but Muslims should go to countries, seek help in countries where their culture is also similar, [those that] culturally are similar (W1)*.

Muslims consistently across all the groups and in both countries were perceived as a looming threat with explicit references to the future:

*Our culture and religion formed for centuries. The Middle East is completely different. Integration is possible just to a certain level (and influenced by the number of migrants and their concentration) – see, for example, the excluded localities in France (B4)*.

*Muslims will come, and when they come, they will destroy [us]; there will be nothing here. We will not have a word; they will do what they want, they will pray ten times during work, they will not work, and a Pole will have to do when [the Muslim] has his prayer (W3)*.

*When it comes to migrants from the Middle East, I think this is stupid in general because these people will never enter [our] culture. They are simply too much rooted in that [other] culture. [It] means completely different customs, that there is no such assimilation, and there will be no assimilation here (W4)*.

A small proportion of the respondents noticed that some of the problems they discussed are only hypothetical, thanks to the small scale of incoming non-European migrants in both countries. Those observations had a "we are not quite there yet" ring to them, the temporal divergence between the Eastern and the Western part of Europe: *In the Czech Republic, the clash is not a threat – there is not enough of them here. In the West, the situation is quite different; there are strong communities there (B4)*. Even though the acknowledged respite was not to be taken for granted: *I also do not feel threatened, and thanks to the currently ruling party, I suspect that we will not feel threatened during their years of power. Compared to other cities and countries, we can feel safe, and many people will agree (W1)*. On the contrary, the respondent understood that certain processes would inevitably brought about changes; cultural enrichment understood as striving for an ideal of a multicultural society, stood starkly in this regard: *It became a synonym for something unwanted, something that causes most people to feel that their hair is standing up (B1)*.

*And the fact that maybe in these other countries such as France it is actually worse [than here], the more so is the political correctness, that the media say otherwise, and sometimes they even did not want to admit the truth, so that let's be tolerant anyway and so on. Let us assume, we [in CEE] must accept and so on (W4)*.

The cultural issues felt real across all the interview groups to varying degrees. On the one hand, the visible signs of cultural diversity, for instance, restaurants offering exotic foods, were appreciated. On the other, the respondents commented on the darker undertows of demographic change: *Do I feel threatened? Culturally (W2)*. In this context, the problem of not integrating and not speaking the language was also regularly raised, although the respondents did not specify whether the lack of common logos is one of the symptoms of not being integrated or an issue on its own: *Because we no longer hear Polish, only Ukrainian everywhere, Warsaw or near Warsaw. And when there will be a lot of them, will they – I don't know – will they not attack us [like in Volhynia<sup>5</sup>] (W4)?*

In this context, the anticipated future emerges not only via the employment of the future tense but also via the juxtaposition of the temporal divergence: *Meaning, we do not yet have such an influx of immigrants from everywhere that we could feel culturally endangered. As unfortunately, they [the Western Europeans] are culturally endangered. The French probably didn't have any culture there; maybe that's why the French don't keep it (W2)*. The possible scenarios based on the "do not yet" appear as a function of modality" whereby the future development would conform to the "futures created beforehand" (Pinot et al., 2021) in Western Europe: *What can be an issue is a situation where a lot of migrants would create a closed group or more families lived together (B1)*. This way, the future is transformed from the if future to a when future: *However, in the Czech Republic, it is not an issue – there are countries which are affected far more, i.e., Germany. It could be a problem if they [migrants] wanted to continue in their faith (B2)*.

Every time the motif of ghettos or so-called "no go zones" appeared, the respondents immediately drew comparisons with western

<sup>5</sup> The Volhynian massacres (Polish: "rzeź wolińska", literally "Volhynian slaughter") took place in 1943. There is no agreement between the Poles and the Ukrainians as to how to categorise these events. The Polish collective memory frames them as anti-Polish genocidal ethnic cleansings conducted by Ukrainian nationalists. The massacres took place within Poland's borders and claimed over 100 000 victims, of whom the overwhelming majority were unarmed civilians murdered with particular cruelty (so-called *genocidium atrox*).

Europe based not so much on media images but on their personal experiences or those shared by immediate family members or close friends: *Like [it is] in London, where you can just be unsure where you are, because it's hard to meet an Englishman there, and it seems to me that if it [migration] would come to Poland on such a large scale, it would be a delicate cultural threat, because not necessarily these people from abroad want to respect our traditions, they are not sympathetic towards it, and they have no idea about our faith or habits, and the more of these people [will come], [the more] they will create their own groups, which will a bit displace our traditions (W2).*

*It seems to me that it does not affect us so much yet, because there are too few of these people, but for example, I cannot imagine a situation like in London, where you can just get confused about where you actually are, because it's hard to meet an Englishman there, and it seems to me that if it [migration] came to Poland on such a large scale, it would be a slight cultural threat because these people from abroad are not necessarily willing to respect our traditions, they are not sympathetic towards them, and they also have concepts neither about our faith nor about our habits, and the more of these people, they will form their own groups (W1).*

*They [migrants] do what they want; it will come to that in a moment, it will be [in] a year or two that they will start to riot, there will be clashes. In my opinion, there will be brawls; they will start destroying bus stops, cars; it is not here yet, it is not talked about, it is not heard on TV, but it is a matter of time when it will happen the same way as – another example – in France what the Blacks, [and] Muslims do. Because France let them in, they let them, they accepted, and they became like this. Like I travel to the Netherlands, because I go fishing, and go out there in the evening to see what's going on. How the Dutch sit at home. Ninety percent of the population in a big Dutch city after 10 p.m. are the Blacks. People are afraid to go out. It will be the same here (W2).*

*These people [in Italy, where immigrants came] no longer had their own city, yes, because it was practically completely overwhelmed by the migrants (W4).*

*In a district such as Ludwigshafen, that is, I am talking about our closest neighbor [Germany], this is happening; there are districts where the police will not enter at all (W2).*

*In France, they are scared, and at the moment, they don't leave the house. They weren't [scared] like that 10–15 years ago either. They let [the migrants] come in, come in. Come, and what they have today, they [the migrants] are so nested, so settled that no strength, no energy will throw them away from this France. It will be the same for us (W2).*

This was particularly visible across all Polish groups, whereas the Czech respondents were more circumspect and did not elaborate on this matter. When the respondents were asked if they felt threatened personally, the consensus was that there is no reason for that, for now. However, there were strong concerns over what would happen in a few years. The theme of dangers looming in the future rather than being anchored in the present was dominant.

*I personally do not feel so threatened in Poland. In Poland, well, in my opinion, it is safe for now (W1).*

*Problems with the law are emerging. When there are clear rules, the problem won't arise. If they were not set, in the end, it can lead to an unwanted change (B4).*

*I think that the near future may pose a threat from these people because the same things will happen [that happened] in Belgium, or in France or in Germany. There will be so many of these migrants that they just – I don't know – they will start to act in some other way (W4).*

*As long as we keep them [migrants] in check a little longer, it may not be second France or second Germany here. I expect the same situation; if we do not stop it, I expect this situation to be in Warsaw in a maximum of five years (W2).*

*Do I feel threatened? Maybe I am thinking about this in general because it is known that it is not 100% certain in which direction it [migration] will go, but maybe not so much at the moment. If more and more of these immigrants come to us, it may be a threat in the near future (W4).*

## 5. The dystopian narratives of securitized future

In both countries, the FGIs reveal a multi-layered fear of more or less distant future. Dovetailing other findings from migration studies (Achilli, 2016; Beare, 1997), one dimension of the issue might be seen as “practical” since people tend to fear of organised crime and terrorism. However, at the same time, they feel obliged to help people who are trying to escape war or other ordeals. This tension creates an interesting dilemma of conditionality (Hunger et al., 2019), either dependent on time (i.e., it ends when the unfavourable conditions pass) or on the behaviour of the migrants (they have to integrate into the majority). The second, and from our point of view more severe and interesting, dimension is the anxiety concerning the permanent change of the societies corresponding with the well-researched cultural purity versus growth of nationalism nexus (Mavroudi, 2010; Thorleifsson, 2021). Accordingly, since both countries are ethnically and culturally homogeneous, according to our respondents the biggest danger clearly lies in creating new, multi-cultural societies and in erosion of traditional cultural and national patterns.

The public is exposed to an unflattering image of migrants in the media and numerous exaggerated statements of politicians. This message is further reinforced by anecdotal dystopian images from major cities in Western Europe are contrary to the existing research (Keith, 2005; Saha, 2022). For many the issue is “the otherness” or “not belonging” of migrants, constructed through factors like ethnicity, skin colour, language, religion, or culture (Balogun, 2020). In other words, visual somatic and corporeal differences are often racialized and stereotyped (Parmar, 2020), while the visible otherness triggers racism and xenophobia. The lifestyle of migrants often

contradicting the national and cultural identity of the majority serves as a trigger (Balogun, 2020). In this sense, our research echoes other studies showing how the majority fears becoming a minority, of being *colonized* within the borders of their own state and becoming second class citizens. Therefore, where help is conditional, the demand for integration of the already stigmatized minorities becomes an unconditional one. Thus, the migrant are condemned into perpetual cultural precarity (Eriksen, 2015) whereby only giving up on their original religion, culture, and habits, can confirm their new societal belonging. Otherwise, their admission should be only temporary or even denied (conf. Sheller, 2011; Tyler, 2018).

It also speaks volumes that most of our respondents did not perceive migrants as a threat for domestic labour market (a “surplus” population), nor did they fear that the migrants would represent a low-cost working force (Rajaram, 2018; Vickers & Rutter, 2018). We believe that this is another consequence of racial stereotypes and media framing. Accordingly, economic migrants represented no “market value” because instead of coming to work, they would rather enjoy the benefits of the welfare state. In this sense, “economic” migrants were dehumanized (McCubbins & Ramirez, 2021) into a “lazy parasites”.

If we organise the findings in accordance with the theoretical frame of societal security and connect them on the temporal basis, the following dystopian scenario emerges: In the CEE, Western Europe is not perceived as a diverse and tolerant place that could be a role model and something to aspire to, but as a dystopian realm brought about by mass migration and caused by irresponsible, even traitorous, political elites (Tyler, 2018). While the process of transformation of a country goes beyond the lifespan of an individual, our interviewees clearly differentiated between the safe “today” and the potentially dangerous “tomorrow.” Analysis of their narratives allows us to sequentially organize their threat projections into a coherent dystopian story, a short-term scenario (Clark, 2000) whereby the short-term future can be assayed through a filter of the socio-cultural lens.

In the first stage, a homogeneous population (almost monolithic ethnically and racially), the country reforms its migration law and opens the border to mass migration from geographically distant and culturally alien civilizations. The time-lapse is evident: whereas this scenario now looms for the Czech Republic and Poland, it describes most of the western countries 50 years ago.

In the second stage, a decade or so later, people of other races are visible in the streets of larger cities, ethnic bars and restaurants appear, but so do the first signs of ghettoization as individual streets or neighbourhoods begin to attract people by country of origin, culture, and religion. Nevertheless, the new minorities are only a few percent of the population and remain marginal. Another leap in time, by thirty or forty years forward, shows very numerous migrant minorities, constituting ten percent or more of the total population. They are concentrated in large cities, where whole districts become hostile and sometimes even inaccessible to the natives. The allusions to or direct acknowledgments of French *banlieues* and German cities were frequent in this regard. It is clear that the state begins to lose control over these zones as they become too dangerous due to increased crime. Furthermore, there are evident ethnic and cultural tensions between individual communities. Minorities become more and more assertive and aggressive in social life, using democratic mechanisms to transform their cultural identities into economic and political influence. This is the future the respondents see awaiting their countries should they follow the path of Western migration policies.

This image leads to even more frightening projections where the indigenous people, half a century earlier, the rightful owners of the country, become *de facto* guests in their own homeland. It shows a multi-ethnic and multiracial society, but with strongly outlined dividing lines that define and separate individual communities, including the now-minority indigenous population, which, until recently, had been the majority. In this vision, such a country’s value system, political structure, economic strength, and culture will depend on the new dominant minority.

Finally, in line with this thinking, it would be false to imagine any present-day Western society as the ultimate result of opening up to mass migration. In the furthest and starkest future looms the image of a country dominated by Muslims (sometimes, in the Polish variant, they are replaced by Ukrainians) who no longer feel that they need to respect the local population and either settle historical scores (a repetition of the Volhynian massacres in the Polish version) or ruin the country completely, replicating the dysfunctions of the places from which they migrated in search of a better fate. It also means that in such a future, the host countries lose all attractiveness to potential new migrants. This understanding of migration dynamics is accompanied by economic decline, decapitalisation of infrastructure, gradual dismantling of the social and economic system, and ever-present violence.

Uncertainty about the future is connected not only with the length of the process but also its endgame. None of the Western EU member states, so often cited by the respondents, has completed the process of diversification, but each is at some stage described above. In this sense, the present conditions in Western societies appear to be a transitional state in a great historical process spread over decades. These changes call into question deeply held convictions that have long served as taken-for-granted assumptions for and serve as a security threat amplifier. Projecting these fundamental changes into the forecasts of national futures, the respondents seem to be asking whether today’s Germany is better than the one that existed half a century ago and wonder if Poland and the Czech Republic be in the same place in five decades. It is unknown when the anticipated moment will come that the historical majority becomes a minority in a given population, but sooner or later, it will be revealed in the census, or via news tidbits peddled by the media, like the information concerning the most popular baby names in the country. However, it is both evident and crucial that all these threats are not placed “in the now.” They belong to some undefined future, and none of the respondents denied the possible short-term benefits of migration both in economic and cultural terms.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

The societal reactions to migration, so conspicuous in Central and Eastern Europe, especially after 2015, were usually met by scholars with either puzzlement or scorn. While neither of those reactions is fruitful, particularly the first is unbecoming the academic community. Prominent interpretations offered to explain this phenomenon are so firmly fixed on the residues of the past and limited to contemporary elements that they remain blind to the crucial variable, the temporal dimension of the problem. On the contrary, by



incorporating the future as a factor of analysis, we are able to shed light on the dynamic of securitized migration. Futures are stretched on a continuum between a vision and a nightmare (Moriarty & Honnery, 2018). Migration contextualises those extremes as the beatific vision of “white mirage” and the nightmare of a “multicultural hell,” and reveals the complex interplay between these two impulses at the everyday level of societal mimesis. This process might serve as a source of temporal dislocation in how the societies secure the future selves in relation to significant others. Our analysis of societal dystopian discourses on migration allows for an engagement with the ontological dimension of the future in the context of Derrida (1990) normal monstrosities whereby the current source of horror is cast into the future as an extrapolation of current trends that form hypothetical chains of events (Hjerpe & Linnér, 2009).

In this regard, the dystopian mindset can continue to work over openly illegitimate postulates or phenomena detached from the immediate experiences to conjure something that Gendron (1977), p. 68) calls a “half-baked” or “mixed” or “intermediate” dystopia. It is also something that mocks the hope for a future promised by the utopia of a multicultural society or, as Cattarinussi (1977), a skeptical disillusion that emphasizes the inherent danger of implementing the utopian perspective. Those forecasts of the inevitable social disaster brought about by relentless migration fit within Cattarinussi’s ‘whimper theory’ that envisions not a single calamity (a bang) but gradual slow-motion destruction wrought by demographic change induced by migration.

Our study shows that – as opposed to other security threats, which become worse the closer and more imminent they appear – migration has a reversed logic and dynamic to it. Accordingly, the more distant the visions connected with the threats caused by migration, the scarier migration becomes for the general public. It is not what is happening now that invokes the feeling of danger; it is the frightening visions of the future that amplify current trends and project them into societal security dilemmas. Dystopia reflects an unyielding and regressive vision of politics (Van Rythoven, 2018), depicting horrifying societies and highlighting the dangers lurking in the future. Moreover, dystopian visions reveal a profound pessimism and therefore lead to the politics of fear (Shames & Atchison, 2019). Deterministic forecasting presents Western Europe’s past and present as Eastern Europe’s future, thus limiting the margin for political maneuver to a minimum, which is pivotal given that different temporal foci interact and produce synergies or competitions (Staupe-Delgado & Rubin, 2022). Whereas the current war-induced migration from Ukraine to Poland and the Czech Republic confronts the positive responses to Ukrainian refugees with the post-2015 adverse reactions to the Middle Eastern migrants, the apprehension towards the future is still palpable, especially in Poland, which accepted over two million of refugees in the span of a month. Visions of “Ukropol” immediately started to float around on social media, and they were only exacerbated by a group of influential Polish politicians from across the spectrum who, at the 7th European Congress of Local Governments, declared that “This is the moment to create a Polish-Ukrainian Union.”

There are noteworthy implications of these insights that ought to be taken on board by the politicians, societies, and researchers alike. Firstly, fears of the future amplified by populist parties thriving on narratives of restorative nationalism (Ding & Hlavac, 2017) can bolster other dystopias of societal exclusion and oppression placed in the now. However, outcomes of migration largely depend on the way migration is valued and managed both on the political and societal level. Allport (1954) specified four conditions for optimal intergroup contact: equal group status, authority support, inter-group cooperation, and common goals. The last element is of critical importance given the temporal dimension of securitized migration. Hence the second lesson for political elites. Highlighting commonalities between different societal groups and focus on the gains of celebrating differences would suggest their exploration as an important strategic source for the nation. That requires openness which reflects a low prescription culture and appreciation whereby migration is perceived as an advantage for the society, rather than as a problem. This brings us to the final conclusion that appreciating diversity on the societal level would relate positively with the multicultural state as a vessel of renewal instead of destruction. This is highlighted by the civil sphere theory which manifests in cross-group solidarity efforts (Tognato et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, as Priyadharshini (2019) advised, we took the inquiry regarding futures beyond the institutional preoccupations and sought out people’s perspectives, which also enables shedding light on how these narratives depart from the mainstream, pre-existing frameworks. This resonates with how the respondents dismissed the obsession of both politicians and the media with current events, which they believed were often exaggerated at the expense of serious debates on the future. Professional politicians are seen to be short-sighted, thinking only about the next poll, or the next elections, mainly focusing on third-rate issues. They are believed to be neither intellectually nor morally prepared to analyse socio-political phenomena - like migration - in the long term. The main concerns expressed during the FGIs in both countries boil down to the fact that no one talks about the long-term effects of migration, which is an irreversible process, and that no one asks the voters whether they want such effects in the future. This places a heavy burden on the national politicians and the supporters of Europe-wide migration policies on the EU level. Western politicians especially are blamed for their unilateral decisions that have tied the hands of successive governments, and most of all, destroyed the future of national communities.

Inadvertently, our study also confirms Pinto et al. (2021) call for methodologies that prioritize the identification of dystopias, which we believe to be a key takeaway for the scholarly community. Although dystopia takes the undesired qualities of contemporary society as a point of departure, it functions as more than merely a scenario that provides a coherent and plausible story about the future of society (Hjerpe & Linnér, 2009, 241). Even though they are based on contrafactual or transfactual propositions, dystopias, Bergman et al. note (2010, p. 863) can have effects of self-fulfilling prophecies, which means that they can have a great impact on social developments of preconditions, reflections, attitudes, and actions taken towards or against the future. Dystopia becomes something more than merely a normative narration capable of tapping into societal anxieties and exploring societal fears. This is where dystopia can be used as a critical method. Once we move beyond simple denunciations of the futures that are seen as both ludicrous and undesirable and reject the blinds of the political mainstream, the dystopian narrative impulse becomes an apparent response to a transformative change. Drawing upon Bina et al. (2020), we can call this phenomenon a heuristic dystopianism that enables going beyond the *prima facie* dominant pessimism and looking into redemptive possibilities of political solutions that are able to overcome the dystopian warnings and explore responses of effective political possibilities that could defuse the time-bomb.

As the dystopian futures are most certainly not inevitable, policymakers on the national and international levels need to consider the bottom-up and future-oriented securitization of migration. Our study confirms that fixation on dispelling fears connected to the present will not resolve the issues that have accumulated around this problem.

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## Authors' contributions

**Monika Gabriela Bartoszewicz:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft and revisions, Funding acquisition. **Otto Eibl:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft and revisions, Funding acquisition. **Magdalena El Gharni:** Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition..

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