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THE PARADOX OF THE CONTENTED MIGRANT IN A CRISIS CONTEXT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MOBBING AND JOB STRESSORS AMONG UKRAINIAN AND POLISH EMPLOYEES

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Purpose: The study compared perceptions of workplace mobbing and psychosocial job stressors between Ukrainian migrant employees and demographically matched Polish employees, examining differences between groups and assessing tenure and gender as moderators.
Design: A matched-pairs design was applied to 198 Ukrainian and 199 Polish employees matched by age, gender, and sector. Mobbing was measured using the SDM-64 Questionnaire, distinguishing behavioural exposure from psychological victimization. Job stressors included organizational constraints, workload, and interpersonal conflict. Non-parametric analyses were conducted.
Findings: Ukrainian employees reported lower levels of mobbing, victimization, constraints, and workload than Polish employees. Tenure effects emerged only among migrants, with increased stress during the second and third years of employment. Women in both groups reported higher victimization; migrant women additionally experienced higher structural stressors.
Research limitations: The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Longitudinal research should examine adaptation trajectories and contextual moderators.
Practical implications: Organizational support should extend beyond onboarding, particularly during intermediate tenure stages, and include gender-sensitive monitoring of workload.
Social implications: The findings underscore differences in stress appraisal between migrant and native employees despite shared working conditions.
Originality: The study advances understanding of the "contented migrant" paradox by integrating resource-based and social comparison perspectives within a matched comparative design.
Keywords: migrant employees, job stressors, workplace mobbing/bullying, migrant adaptation, social comparison.
Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The transformation of the Central European labour market, triggered by the mass influx of Ukrainian war refugees after February 2022, constitutes a major socio-economic shift in the region's recent history. Poland, as the primary destination for millions of Ukrainians, faced the unprecedented challenge of integrating two distinct migrant groups: a pre-existing population of economic migrants and a new, large wave of refugees predominantly composed of women and children.

While statistical data indicate a remarkably high employment rate among adult refugees, oscillating around 78-80% (OECD, 2023), these figures obscure underlying structural inequalities and psychological burdens. The quality of employment—particularly exposure to workplace mobbing and psychosocial stressors—is critical, given that precarious work conditions are well-established predictors of poor mental health and unsuccessful social integration (Porter, Haslam, 2005; Hobfoll et al., 2018; Einarsen, 2020).

Despite high labour market participation, Ukrainian employees in Poland face systemic barriers that constrain their professional well-being and reinforce their position within the secondary labour market. They are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage, unstable sectors. Institutional reports from the National Labour Inspectorate (PIP, 2025) indicate increasing irregularities in the employment of foreigners, including safety violations and accountability gaps within outsourcing arrangements, facilitating exploitative practices. Nearly half of Ukrainian employees (49%) earn below 3,000 PLN net per month, placing 46% at risk of poverty, compared to 9% of Polish citizens (NBP, 2024).

A central mechanism sustaining this precarity is occupational downgrading, commonly referred to as "brain waste". Approximately 30-40% of Ukrainian refugees work below their qualifications, while only 20% of high-skilled professionals maintain their pre-migration occupational status (Lewandowski et al., 2025). This downward mobility is associated with routine-intensive tasks, diminished autonomy, and reduced career prospects, thereby undermining professional identity and self-esteem.

These disadvantages are compounded by institutional precarity and war-related trauma. Clinical evidence suggests that up to 70% of refugees exhibit symptoms consistent with PTSD (Długosz, 2023), contributing to cumulative resource loss and shaping stress appraisal.

Extensive research indicates that precarious employment is associated with increased exposure to job stressors—such as organizational constraints, high workload, and interpersonal conflict—as well as a higher risk of workplace mobbing (Einarsen et al., 2020). Mobbing (also referred to as workplace bullying) is defined as persistent exposure to hostile and unwanted behaviours, typically occurring in situations of power asymmetry (Einarsen et al., 2020). Moreover, mobbing is a dynamic process involving escalating psychological harm and cumulative resource loss experienced by the target (Durniat, 2020, 2025; Nielsen, Einarsen, 2018).

While the economic aspects of Ukrainian migration to Poland have been widely examined (OECD, 2023; NBP, 2024), less attention has been devoted to the psychosocial risks faced by migrant workers. Little is known about how employees operating under conditions of cumulative stress and prior trauma appraise negative workplace experiences. Although some international studies have addressed these issues, most focus on migrant populations without matched native comparison groups, limiting the ability to disentangle structural labour market effects from vulnerabilities associated with migrant status.

To address this gap, the present study employs a matched-pairs design, comparing Ukrainian migrant employees with Polish employees matched on gender, age, and sector. This approach enables a more precise assessment of whether differences in exposure to mobbing—conceptualized as behavioural exposure and psychological victimization—and key psychosocial stressors (organizational constraints, workload, and interpersonal conflict) reflect objective job characteristics or differences in stress appraisal (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984; Baka, Bazińska, 2016; Durniat, 2020).

The study is grounded in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001), which conceptualizes stress as a response to threatened or lost resources. Refugees and forced migrants are often described as entering host labour markets with depleted resource reservoirs due to trauma, displacement, and uncertainty (Porter, Haslam, 2005; Hobfoll et al., 2018). From this perspective, two competing mechanisms can be identified. The vulnerability perspective suggests that cumulative resource loss heightens sensitivity to additional stressors, increasing both exposure to negative workplace behaviours and the likelihood of psychological harm (Hobfoll, 2001; Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Conversely, a resilience or relative reference perspective posits that prior exposure to severe adversity may recalibrate stress appraisal thresholds (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984). Drawing on relative deprivation theory (Smith et al., 2012; Walker, Smith, 2002) and research on migrant satisfaction paradoxes (Bartram, 2011), workplace stressors may be evaluated against more adverse pre-migration experiences.

Against this theoretical background, the study compares Ukrainian migrant and Polish employees in terms of exposure to workplace mobbing and key psychosocial job stressors. Grounded in the vulnerability framework, it is expected that migrant employees will report higher levels of both stressors and mobbing-related experiences than their native counterparts. At the same time, the study examines whether these relationships vary as a function of tenure and gender, capturing potential adaptation processes and group-specific vulnerabilities (Ward, Geeraert, 2016).

2. Method

2.1. Participants and Selection Procedure

The initial sample comprised 869 employees (410 Polish, 459 Ukrainian) working in various sectors of the Polish economy. To ensure cross-national comparability and reduce demographic confounding, a purposive pair-matching procedure was applied based on sector, gender, and age. Because 98.7% of Ukrainian participants were employed in the private sector, public-sector employees were excluded to avoid sectoral bias.

For each Ukrainian participant, a Polish counterpart was selected using exact matching on gender and age group. When multiple matches were available, preference was given to candidates employed in the same industry and holding comparable job positions.

The final matched sample included N = 397 participants: 199 Polish and 198 Ukrainian employees. The two groups were equivalent in gender distribution and age structure (M_age category = 2.49, SD = 0.83 in both groups), ensuring comparability without major demographic imbalance.

Overall, the sample consisted of 52.4% men and 47.6% women. Most participants were aged 26-35 (40.3%) or 36–45 (37.8%), while younger (<25) and older (>45) employees each constituted approximately 11%.

Despite demographic equivalence, occupational differences reflected labour-market segmentation. Ukrainian participants were predominantly employed in industry (88.4%) and in subordinate positions (94.4%), whereas the Polish group showed greater occupational diversity, including services and trade, and a higher proportion of specialist or managerial roles. These structural differences were retained to preserve ecological validity.

2.2. Procedure and Data Collection

Data were collected in the second half of 2023 in Wrocław and the Lower Silesia region, a major economic hub with a substantial Ukrainian migrant population.

The study was conducted online using convenience and snowball sampling through professional and personal networks. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the scientific purpose of the study, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Assessment of Mobbing

Workplace mobbing was assessed using the 64-item version of the SDM Questionnaire (Skala Doświadczania Mobbingu), developed and psychometrically validated in the Polish socio-organizational context (Durniat, 2020, 2025). The questionnaire comprises 64 items rated

on a 5-point frequency scale (1 = never, 5 = very often) and differentiates between behavioural exposure (SDM-IDM) and psychological harm/victimization (SDM-ODC), reflecting the interactional approach to workplace mobbing (Durniat, 2020, 2025).

The SDM-IDM scale includes 43 items and demonstrated excellent internal consistency in prior validation studies (α ≈ .96; Durniat, 2020), which was replicated in the present study (α = .96). It comprises three subdimensions: Isolation and Intimidation (19 items; α = .91; e.g., "My credibility and authority at work are challenged"), Humiliation and Ridicule (17 items; α = .94; e.g., "My every mistake is seized upon and blown out of proportion"), and Obstruction of Tasks (7 items; α = .81; e.g., "I receive contradictory orders").

The SDM-ODC scale consists of 21 items assessing cognitive–emotional and psychosomatic harm (e.g., "I feel less and less confident at work", "After leaving the workplace I feel mentally exhausted and shattered"). Prior studies reported excellent internal consistency for this scale (α ≈ .97; Durniat, 2020), which was replicated in the present sample (α = .97).

2.3.2. Assessment of Job Stressors

Psychosocial job stressors were measured using three established self-report instruments developed by Spector and Jex (1998): the Organizational Constraints Scale (OCS), the Quantitative Workload Inventory (QWI), and the Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale (ICAWS). These measures conceptualize job stressors as situational and interpersonal demands that impede effective performance and contribute to psychological strain. The scales were adapted and psychometrically validated in the Polish socio-organizational context by Baka and Bazińska (2016), confirming their factorial structure and satisfactory reliability.

The OCS (11 items) assesses situational barriers interfering with task execution (e.g., "How often do you find it difficult to do your job because of inadequate equipment or supplies?") and demonstrated high reliability in the present study (α = .91). The QWI (5 items) measures perceived workload intensity and pace (e.g., "How often does your job require you to work very fast?"; α = .90). The ICAWS (4 items) captures the frequency of interpersonal tensions and arguments at work (e.g., "How often do you get into arguments with others at work?"; α = .76). These instruments have demonstrated meaningful associations with workplace bullying, supporting their relevance for assessing psychosocial risk environments.

2.4. Cross-Language Adaptation Procedure

All instruments administered to the Ukrainian sub-sample underwent double-translation and expert verification in accordance with established cross-cultural adaptation guidelines (Beaton et al., 2000). Independent translation and back-translation were conducted by bilingual psychology graduates, followed by expert reconciliation by a senior scholar in work and organizational psychology. Any discrepancies were resolved by consensus to ensure semantic and conceptual equivalence across language versions.

2.5. Statistical Approach and Preliminary Analysis

Data distributions were examined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, which indicated significant deviations from normality for all variables ($p < .001$). Accordingly, non-parametric tests were applied. The Mann–Whitney U test was used for two-group comparisons (nationality, gender), and the Kruskal–Wallis H test for multi-group analyses (tenure). Effect sizes were calculated using the r coefficient (.10 = small, .30 = medium, .50 = large).

3. Results

3.1. Comparative Analysis of Mobbing Exposure and Victimization

The analysis examined differences in workplace mobbing between Ukrainian migrant employees and matched Polish employees (Table 1).

Table 1.
Comparison of Mobbing Exposure and Victimization Between Ukrainian and Polish Employees (N = 397)

Variable	Ukrainian (n = 198) M (SD)	Polish (n = 199) M (SD)	Z	p	r
SDM-IDM Total	52.38 (15.94)	58.95 (18.25)	-5.88	< .001	.30
Isolation & Intimidation	22.94 (7.20)	25.92 (8.34)	-6.01	< .001	.30
Humiliation & Ridicule	19.75 (6.58)	21.77 (7.10)	-5.38	< .001	.27
Obstruction of Tasks	9.69 (3.36)	11.26 (4.25)	-3.85	< .001	.19
SDM-ODC (Harm)	28.22 (10.55)	33.63 (12.89)	-5.84	< .001	.29

Note. SDM-IDM = behavioural exposure to mobbing; SDM-ODC = psychological harm and victimization; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Z = Mann–Whitney U standardized test statistic; r = effect size calculated as $Z/\sqrt{N}$.

Source: Own research, Katarzyna Durniat.

Significant differences emerged across all dimensions of mobbing. Polish employees reported higher levels of overall mobbing exposure (SDM-IDM Total: $Z = -5.88$, $p < .001$, $r = .30$), as well as psychological harm and victimization (SDM-ODC: $Z = -5.84$, $p < .001$, $r = .29$).

This pattern was consistent across behavioural subdimensions. The largest differences were observed for Isolation and Intimidation ($Z = -6.01$, $p < .001$, $r = .30$) and Humiliation and Ridicule ($Z = -5.38$, $p < .001$, $r = .27$), while Obstruction of Tasks showed a smaller, though still significant, effect ($Z = -3.85$, $p < .001$, $r = .19$).

Overall, Polish employees reported a more hostile work environment than their Ukrainian counterparts.

3.2. Comparative Analysis of Job Stressors

Differences were also observed in perceived job stressors (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Comparison of Job Stressors Between Ukrainian and Polish Employees (N = 397)

Scale	Ukrainian (n = 198) M (SD)	Polish (n = 199) M (SD)	Z	p	r
ICAWS (Conflict)	4.64 (1.23)	4.96 (1.70)	-1.76	.034	.09
OCS (Constraints)	13.74 (4.83)	18.57 (7.74)	-7.38	< .001	.37
QWI (Workload)	10.23 (5.07)	14.36 (5.12)	-7.92	< .001	.40

Note. ICAWS = Interpersonal Conflict at Work Scale; OCS = Organizational Constraints Scale; QWI = Quantitative Workload Inventory; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Z = Mann-Whitney U standardized test statistic; r = effect size calculated as $Z/\sqrt{N}$.

Source: Own research, Katarzyna Durniat.

Polish employees reported significantly higher levels of Quantitative Workload ($Z = -7.92$, $p < .001$, $r = .40$) and Organizational Constraints ($Z = -7.38$, $p < .001$, $r = .37$), both with medium effect sizes. In contrast, differences in interpersonal conflict were small ($Z = -1.76$, $p = .034$, $r = .09$), indicating largely comparable levels of direct interpersonal tensions. Overall, the most pronounced disparities concerned structural and workload-related stressors rather than overt conflict.

3.3. The Influence of Tenure on Stressors

To examine whether stress perceptions varied with tenure, Kruskal–Wallis H tests were conducted separately for each national subgroup. Among Ukrainian employees, tenure significantly differentiated mobbing exposure ($H = 20.11$, $p < .001$), victimization ($H = 14.05$, $p = .007$), and organizational constraints ($H = 13.49$, $p = .009$). The highest mean levels were observed among employees with 1–3 years of tenure (mobbing: $M = 64.23$; victimization: $M = 35.17$; constraints: $M = 16.03$), whereas those employed for less than one year reported the lowest scores.

In contrast, no significant tenure effects were observed among Polish employees (all $p > .05$). Descriptive trends indicated a gradual increase in mobbing and victimization across tenure categories in the Polish group, whereas the migrant group displayed a non-linear pattern.

3.4. Gender Differences in Stressors and Victimization

Gender analyses revealed both similarities and differences across national groups. In both samples, women reported significantly higher levels of psychological harm and victimization (SDM-ODC) than men (Poles: $Z = 2.07$, $p = .038$; Ukrainians: $Z = 2.48$, $p = .012$). Among Polish employees, women reported higher levels of interpersonal conflict ($Z = 2.28$, $p = .009$). Among Ukrainian employees, women reported higher quantitative workload ($Z = 2.62$,

p = .008), organizational constraints (Z = 2.20, p = .020), and task-related obstruction (Z = 2.07, p = .033). No comparable structural gender differences were observed among Polish employees.

4. Discussion

The present study compared perceptions of workplace mistreatment and psychosocial stressors between Ukrainian migrant employees and demographically matched Polish employees. Using a matched-pairs design, it examined whether migrant status is associated with heightened perceptions of mobbing and job stressors in the context of recent geopolitical instability. The findings challenge the assumption that migrant workers necessarily experience greater subjective vulnerability and underscore the importance of tenure and gender in shaping stress appraisal.

Contrary to expectations derived from the vulnerability perspective, Ukrainian employees reported significantly lower levels of mobbing exposure, victimization, organizational constraints, and quantitative workload than their Polish counterparts. Differences in interpersonal conflict were negligible. These findings do not support a simple loss-spiral interpretation but instead indicate a more complex pattern of stress appraisal among migrant workers (Bartram, 2011; Olgiati et al., 2013; de Vroome, Hooghe, 2014; Safi, 2010).

This counterintuitive result may be interpreted through Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Gerber et al., 2018), which emphasizes the role of shifting reference standards in stress appraisal. It is further consistent with the concept of relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2012; Walker, Smith, 2002). Stress perceptions are inherently comparative and shaped by reference standards (Gerber et al., 2018).

For native employees, these standards may include organizational ideals or Western European labour norms. In contrast, migrants escaping war-related instability or economic collapse may evaluate current working conditions against far more adverse prior experiences. Such reference shifts play a central role in explaining migrant life satisfaction and adaptation (de Vroome & Hooghe, 2014; Safi, 2010). Under these circumstances, demands that might be perceived as burdensome by native workers may be appraised as tolerable or even favorable.

From the perspective of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001; Halbesleben et al., 2014), employment itself constitutes a critical resource for migrants, providing income, legal stability, and psychological security. COR theory posits that individuals are motivated to protect valued resources and avoid further loss, particularly when resources are already threatened (Hobfoll, 2001). Accordingly, the motivation to preserve employment may elevate the cognitive threshold for labeling negative behaviors as mobbing or stressful, thereby attenuating reported exposure and harm. Together, these mechanisms explain

the "contented migrant" paradox: lower reported stress despite structurally constrained conditions.

Tenure analyses indicated that stress perceptions varied only among Ukrainian employees, revealing a non-linear pattern. Migrants in their first year reported the lowest levels of mobbing and constraints, followed by a marked increase among those with 1-3 years of tenure, and a subsequent decline among longer-tenured employees. This pattern may reflect a temporary buffering effect during initial resettlement, potentially driven by relief, gratitude, or protective cognitive framing in the immediate post-migration period. As adaptation progresses, migrants may become more aware of status inconsistency and occupational downgrading, increasing sensitivity to workplace stressors.

Such trajectories are consistent with acculturation models describing early optimism followed by adjustment strain (Ward, Geeraert, 2016) and align with reference-dependent appraisal mechanisms discussed earlier. The absence of tenure effects among Polish employees suggests that this pattern is specific to migration-related adaptation rather than general organizational socialization. Importantly, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as the cross-sectional design precludes causal conclusions regarding adaptation trajectories. Longitudinal studies are needed to verify whether the observed tenure pattern reflects within-person change over time.

Gender analyses further indicated that stress experiences varied across national groups. In both samples, women reported higher levels of psychological victimization, consistent with prior research indicating that women are more likely to report relational forms of workplace bullying and experience stronger psychological consequences (Nielsen, Einarsen, 2018; Salin, Hoel, 2013). However, among Ukrainian employees, women also reported higher structural stressors (workload, organizational constraints, and task obstruction), a pattern not observed in the Polish group. This finding aligns with intersectionality frameworks suggesting that overlapping minority statuses may amplify structural strain. Given that migrant women are often employed below their qualifications, increased workload may reflect compensatory overperformance or pressure to secure employment stability.

These results have important practical implications. Although migrant employees may not initially report elevated stress, vulnerability may increase during intermediate tenure stages. Organizational support should therefore extend beyond initial onboarding, particularly during the second and third years of employment. Career development planning, anti-discrimination initiatives, and gender-sensitive workload monitoring may help prevent the escalation of victimization and burnout among migrant workers.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. Pre-migration trauma and individual resilience factors were not directly measured and may influence stress appraisal. Future research should also examine the role of language proficiency and organizational inclusion practices as potential moderators of mobbing exposure and victimization.

5. Summary

This study challenges the prevailing vulnerability narrative in migration and stress research (Hobfoll, 2001; Porter, Haslam, 2005) by demonstrating that Ukrainian migrant employees reported lower levels of mobbing exposure, victimization, and structural job stressors than demographically matched Polish employees. Rather than reflecting absence of strain, these findings suggest a reference-dependent appraisal process (Festinger, 1954; Gerber et al., 2018) combined with resource-protection mechanisms emphasized in Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001; Halbesleben et al., 2014). Together, these processes explain the "contented migrant" paradox.

At the same time, the results reveal conditional vulnerability. Migrants exhibited a non-linear adaptation trajectory consistent with contemporary acculturation models (Ward, Geeraert, 2016), with heightened stress during intermediate tenure stages. Gender further differentiated outcomes, as migrant women experienced elevated structural strain, aligning with intersectional perspectives on workplace inequality (Salin, Hoel, 2013).

By integrating social comparison, relative deprivation, and resource-based frameworks, this study advances a more differentiated understanding of migrant adaptation in organizational contexts and underscores the need for sustained, gender-sensitive organizational support beyond initial onboarding phases.

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