

Heroes or villains? Migrant essential workers and combined hostilities of Covid-19 and Brexit

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Villainised in populist discourses, migrant workers – especially those doing essential work – gained some positive attention in the context of Covid-19. Considered to be heroes and being clapped weekly has however been short-lived against the increasingly hostile immigration politics of the UK. How have the combined hostilities of Brexit and the pandemic affected migrant workers from Eastern Europe? Were they heroes just for one day? We look at the case of Poles who constitute one of the UK's largest foreign-born populations.

Hostile environment comes in different forms and guises as the articles in this special issue powerfully demonstrate. Since 2012, when it was first introduced as a set of policy measures to tackle undocumented migration in the UK, the term hostile environment has gained a much broader meaning and is now used to describe the policy and practice of sustained inhospitality to migrant, minoritised and indigenous populations in various national contexts and historical times ([Gawlewicz and Yiftachel 2022](#)).

In this contribution, we focus on European Union (EU) migrants in the UK who, until recently, were legally protected from the effects of the hostile environment policy given their special status linked to EU citizenship. However, after decades of relative (though contested) privilege, this was put to an end in January 2021 in the aftermath of Brexit.

Following Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic further disproportionately impacted on migrant workers in the UK. Here we draw on a study on migrant essential workers and how they have been affected by Covid-19 in terms of health, economically and socio-culturally (see [project website](#)).

Migrant essential workers played a critical role in keeping the UK economy and society going during the pandemic and in Covid-19 recovery. Their contributions to key sectors such as health care, food production and transport are tremendous. Yet their structurally disadvantaged and often precarious professional and personal circumstances – the fact that many are employed on temporary or zero-hours contracts, work in unsafe conditions or have limited or no recourse to public funds (see Erel et al, in this special issue) – has been largely underappreciated.

To do justice to complicated positionalities, and to explore experiences with an adequate level of nuance and detail, we decided to focus on one EU migrant group as a case study. We opted for Polish migrants who constitute [one of the most numerous](#) and prominent non-British nationalities in the UK and are employed in a broad range of essential work roles and sectors, including [10,000 in the NHS](#). Although many Polish people work in lower-paid and lower-skilled occupations, a significant (and growing) number do medium- and higher-paid jobs with considerable professional responsibility. This is complicated by a distinct and well-

documented history of discrimination and racism associated with the imposed ‘white but not quite’ Eastern European identity, including in the context of Brexit ([Narkowicz 2023](#)).

To explore their lived experiences, we surveyed 1,105 Polish essential workers and interviewed 40 of them to dig deeper into their stories. We also spoke to 10 representatives of voluntary sector organisations providing support to migrant workers in the UK.

We established that Polish essential workers were severely impacted by the pandemic with 55% of survey participants reporting that their mental health deteriorated and 40% reporting a worsening financial situation. The reasons for that varied but there were strong patterns linked to increased pressure at work, greater exposure to Covid-19 as well as redundancies, pay cuts and rejected benefit applications. These impacts were compounded by the sense of isolation, helplessness, or long-distance grief due to inability to visit loved ones in Poland.

Importantly, these impacts were very uneven with people being affected in different ways and to a different degree. We found that women with caring responsibilities, single parents and people in the health and teaching sectors were affected most. Our interviews helped us tease out some of the important nuances here, for example we spoke to women who had to give up their jobs to be able to provide childcare during the lockdown. We heard from participants who found working in healthcare during the major health crisis emotionally draining and deeply scarring.

But our main finding is that the most vulnerable migrant essential workers – those on lower income, with pre-existing health conditions, restricted access to support and limited English proficiency – were at most risk. This type of vulnerability is not new, of course; there is a long and well-researched history of migrant disadvantage with precarity and insecurity being ingrained in the migrant worker status, especially in lower-paid and lower-skilled sectors ([Lewis et al. 2015](#)).

However, what is new is that these vulnerabilities were amplified by the anti-immigration campaign that unfolded around the 2016 Brexit referendum and were reflected in the [rise of hate crimes towards migrants](#), including Poles. The experiences of [Brexit-associated hostility](#) and discrimination among EU (and other migrant and minoritised populations) have been widely reported in academic research ([Rzepnikowska 2019](#)) and may partly explain why as many as 34% of our survey respondents planned to leave the UK or were unsure about their future place of residence.

This is a consequence of being caught up both by Brexit and then Covid-19. In this unprecedented context, migrant workers find themselves pulled between conflicting public personas as *pandemic heroes* on the one hand and *migrant villains* on the other. There is also a ‘new’ narrative that we noticed – of *unwanted guests* – which is symptomatic of the combined hostilities of Brexit and Covid-19.

Historically, migrants have tended to be constructed as villains, in particular in times of austerity. In the UK, tabloid media and hostile political discourses have significantly contributed to these portrayals with stories of [migrant job takers, health tourists and benefits scroungers](#) mushrooming throughout the economic crisis of the late 2000s, the Mediterranean crisis and then Brexit. In these stories, migrants continue to be presented as a threat to the British economy, integrity and its ‘way of life’ (whatever it means). They are constructed as

different and other, and are systematically racialised, homogenised, and de-humanised (as noted by D'Angelo and Dimitriadis in this special issue).

Covid-19 has complicated this portrayal for migrant essential workers. They were suddenly [put on par with heroes](#) for risking their own lives to deliver key, oftentimes lifesaving, services in the face of a major crisis. The value of their work – providing care, producing and delivering food or keeping public spaces clean and safe – seemed to be finally appreciated. Whether this appreciation comes from the place of respect or exploitation remains contested, though. In 2021, Bulgarian and Romanian workers were [flown to the UK](#) to help address major labour shortages in the food production sector. This occurred during the full lockdown while borders were closed off for most people with purely economic motives taking precedence over health and safety.

Navigating between the heroes and villains narratives was tricky for Polish essential workers in our study. At best, they were confused about their status. At worst, they experienced ovations one minute and racism the next. Importantly, while positive on the surface, the heroes narrative was seen as equally problematic as the villains narrative. First of all, it does not account for multiple insecurities that Polish essential workers experienced, especially in terms of precarious employment, unsafe work conditions, clustering in the so-called '3D jobs' (i.e. dirty, dangerous and demeaning), limited access to support, but also exclusion, discrimination, and often profound isolation from family. In doing so, they felt this narrative did not do any justice to them, as captured by one of our interviewees below:

I haven't felt any difference after being labelled as essential worker. It hasn't affected me in any [positive] ways. (...) There have been no financial benefits either. The only recognition that we received was through clapping [for carers]... once a week, I don't even remember now. (...) I did not understand that. I saw no reason for doing that because it changes absolutely nothing for me. (Stanisław, care assistant, in his 30s)

Secondly, there was also a sense that the heroes narrative was short-lived, with a gradual return to the dominant portrayal as villains, especially by the tabloid media. Needless to say, it is these stories (rather than the heroes ones) that gain greater traction and tend to primarily affect public attitudes towards immigration.

Against this backdrop, migrant workers continue to live with uncertainty in the aftermath of Brexit and Covid-19. A growing body of research shows that this clearly correlates with migrants' sense of identity, belonging and future plans (e.g. [Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan, 2022](#); [Guma and Dafydd Jones 2018](#)). This is something that our interviewees also felt strongly about. Below a representative of a support organisation, a Polish migrant herself, reflects on these identity struggles.

What Brexit has done... [quoting] 'Poles take British jobs.' 'There are too many Poles.' 'It's all our fault that there are no places in schools and hospitals.' This made Polish migrants feel like unwanted guests. (...) It used to be: 'Wow! So hard working!' Now it's: 'You folks lower our [salary] rates, you take jobs from us.' (...) I think that in order to deal with these insecurities some Poles turn to nationalism and the far-right. Like: 'Oh, they don't want us, they criticise us. Well, we'll be proudly Polish'. (...) It all happens because we're unwanted and badly treated and called names. (Polish migrant support organisation)

The interviewee shares her understanding of attitudes towards Polish migrants in the past 20 or so years. From being welcome for filling gaps in labour shortages, to being blamed for taking jobs, Polish people remain at the forefront of public attention. The conflicting narratives that they are exposed to, she suggests, may be pushing some to find refuge in toxic nationalism, which is highly problematic in its own right. Although Covid-19 is not explicitly mentioned here, the interview was structured around it and the sentiments that the interviewee discussed attest to the combined and mutually reinforcing hostilities of Brexit and the pandemic.

Related to this is an issue of settlement plans. As mentioned, 34% of our survey participants either planned to leave the UK in the next few years or were unsure. We established that Covid-19 – as an isolated circumstance – did not seem to affect these plans to a great extent. However, Brexit featured strongly in migrant interviews with stories of [discrimination, exclusion, and feeling underappreciated](#) and, indeed, ‘unwanted’. It was clear that it is the combination of Brexit and Covid-19 that created a hostile environment for Polish migrants in the UK. Covid-19 seems to have reinforced pre-existing borders that [Brexit had created for Poles](#). While the nature of this hostile environment may be different to the hostilities experienced by the Windrush generation (as noted by Reynolds et al. in this special issue), Afghan refugees (see Ryan et al.) or those subjected to offshoring (see Blitz), the human cost and the consequences in terms of lived experience have had an overwhelmingly negative impact on migrant workers.

The article draws upon the research project *Health, social, economic and cultural impacts of Covid-19 on migrant essential workers in the UK* funded by UK Research and Innovation via the Economic and Social Research Council grant ES/V015877/1.

Project website: www.migrantessentialworkers.com

Twitter: [@MigrEssentWork](https://twitter.com/MigrEssentWork)

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gawlewicz, Anna, Kasia Narkowicz and Sharon Wright 2023. 'Heroes or villains? Migrant essential workers and combined hostilities of Covid-19 and Brexit' *Discover Society: New Series* 3 (2):