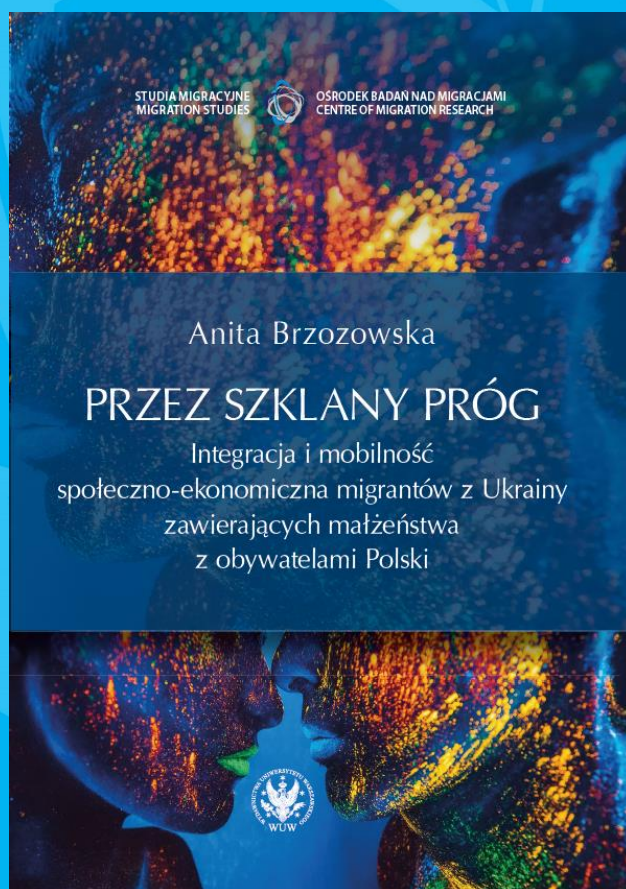


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Integration across the glass thresholds

The CMR is buzzing with excitement as we get ready to host 927 participants (in person, and more online) for the IMISCOE Annual Conference, this year held at the University of Warsaw on July 3-6. Learn all about the sessions, participants and numerous side events [here](#), and on our [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts.

The subjects to be discussed include recent migrations in Central and Eastern Europe. This is also the topic of this CMR Spotlight, in which Anita Brzozowska writes about her [book](#) on the integration of Ukrainian citizens (mostly women) married to Poles. This has become an even more timely topic after the February 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine, and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian women in Poland. You can also refer to her [recent article in JEMS](#).



„Across the glass threshold. Integration and socio-economic mobility of migrants from Ukraine marrying Polish citizens” by Anita Brzozowska



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Integration across the glass thresholds

Anita Brzowska

Researchers' interest in mixed relationships has increased significantly in the last decade, especially in multi-ethnic countries, which have traditionally attracted economic migrants. Firstly, family reunification and marriage migration remained one of the few ways to get into EU countries for third-country nationals – in EU parlance – who do not meet the increasingly stringent selection criteria adopted for migration. Secondly, the search by the descendants of migrants for partners in their parent's countries of origin began to be portrayed in the mass media as a failure of integration, a manifestation of negative attitudes towards the majority group in a given society and, at the same time, as reproducing the marginalisation of migrants through their attachment to traditional norms and values. Moreover, women were put in the spotlight, portrayed as guardians and importers of traditionalism.

Nevertheless, a lively discussion taking place in numerous academic journals has eventually led to the development of a critical perspective on those presumptions, as well as assumptions present in classical theories regarding a simple relationship between mixed marriage and the integration of migrants. Research has shown that both partners in mixed relationships may experience discrimination and negative attitudes from representatives of the majority groups but also from their own families. Furthermore, prejudices regarding

nationality, ethnicity, race, culture or religion may even function within the mixed couple itself, which means that mixed couples do not automatically erase boundaries between social groups.

In Poland, relatively little attention has been paid to the topic of intermarriage. Therefore, the presented book aims to fill the gap in our knowledge about the experiences of migrants from Ukraine intermarrying with Polish citizens living in the Warsaw agglomeration, joining in a discussion about tolerance, reducing socio-cultural, ethnic and racial distances, as well as the emergence of new differences and identities. Drawing on 42 in-depth interviews with intermarried migrants, it offers analyses of the relationship between different dimensions of integration and the subjectively perceived socio-economic mobility, understood as perceived changes in the social status achieved by migrants and their opportunities for material and professional advancement, as well as downgrading in the country of origin as well as in the host country.

I decided to use the contested concept of integration for several reasons. The main point was to capture the relational social processes, as the concept of integration continues to be helpful in understanding the mechanisms involved in maintaining and changing social group boundaries. New models of integration emphasise its relational character as a two-way process across

multiple domains and allow for inclusion in the analyses of various forms of discrimination and exclusionary practices associated with the diverse repertoire of roles played by representatives of the host society. Moreover, these models do not focus on the operationalisation of indicators for strictly quantitative studies and the performance of migrants in terms of diminishing differences between 'them' and the host society as a monolithic entity, but on the meanings attributed to perceived differences. They acknowledge that maintaining group distinctiveness can constitute an important value. In addition, apart from rejecting normative assumptions and moving beyond links to integration policies, more nuanced conceptions of integration offer a conceptual apparatus that allows for a multidimensional and comprehensive approach to empirical research.

Moving from stereotypes toward unpacking evidence

There are many common opinions and stereotypes about the character of intimate relationships of Ukrainian migrants with Polish citizens, echoing post-colonial domination, which is especially visible in portraying Ukrainian women through the prism of their sexual attractiveness on the one hand and submissiveness towards Polish men, and attachment to the traditional gender roles on the other. In contrast to analogous debates in so-called traditional immigration countries, integration of Ukrainian migrants in Poland, including those in relationships with Polish citizens, is often

treated and presented in the public discourse as unproblematic, because of the assumed cultural proximity and lack of communication barriers due to the similarity of Slavic languages and historical experiences. Furthermore, there are even assumptions about the assimilation of this group, and this is not only due to the erroneous use of the term as a synonym for integration. Migrants from Ukraine are expected to blend into Polish society. For that reason, it is so important to empirically verify the assumptions made about the integration and mobility of migrants from Ukraine, while taking into account in the analyses the changing and broader context of Polish transformation from a country of emigration to a country of immigration, as well as the politicisation of the discourse related to migration. Despite the dominant narrative of unproblematic integration of Ukrainians in Poland and cultural proximity, both male and female interviewees encountered various initially invisible barriers to integration, which can be called 'glass thresholds' that divide social groups and appear not only at the systemic level but also in everyday contacts between migrants and representatives of the host society. As it turns out, even the establishment of emotional ties with the spouse and inclusion in his or her social groups and networks did not automatically translate into the acceptance of migrants in roles going beyond those ascribed to labour migrants working in the secondary sector of the labour market (i.e. housekeeping and domestic care). On the other hand, the cultural proximity emphasised in the

discourse is often reduced to assumptions about the unproblematic and rapid learning of the Polish language.

Although, due to the implementation of the study in the Warsaw agglomeration, its results cannot be generalised to the entire population, it should be emphasised that even in this limited sample, it showed the multidimensionality and complexity of the relationship between intermarriage and the integration of migrants. Mixed marriages are not a simple indicator of the weakening of distances between social groups, as they do not imply the disappearance of prejudice and discrimination against a minority group distinguished based on ethnicity and nationality. However, both male and female participants of the study had pro-integration attitudes. It is also worth noting the emergence of the so-called 'paradox of integration', which means that migrants with high cultural capital perceive higher discrimination and limitations of professional opportunities. Awareness of discrimination hinders integration, i.e. establishing satisfactory relations with representatives of the host society. Moreover, the research findings indicate that upon arrival in Poland, Ukrainian migrants experienced a subjective lowering of their social status and temporary professional degradation related to the mismatch between their qualifications and the local labour market, problems with the recognition of their education and poor initial knowledge of the Polish language.

The near and unknown future

It should be emphasised that regardless of the development of the situation in Ukraine, we will observe a significant increase in the number of Ukrainian nationals and citizens residing in Poland compared to the situation before 2022, which raises a number of questions about the potential increase in the number of Polish-Ukrainian couples, the continuation of the asymmetry observed so far in the number of mixed marriages between Poles and Ukrainians (over the years, the vast majority are couples of a man who has Polish citizenship and a woman who has Ukrainian citizenship), and integration issues. The unprecedented influx of war refugees following the Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has opened a new chapter in the history of Ukrainian migration to Poland, constituting a long-term test of hospitality. The almost unanimously favourable attitude of Poles towards the reception of refugees from Ukraine, which persisted for the first months after the Russian aggression, was accompanied in Polish social media by increased interest in relationships with Ukrainian women. In just a few weeks in the spring of 2022, thematic groups dedicated to dating Ukraine women increased by several thousand users – mainly men, specifying requirements for future potential partners, which draws our attention to the mutual perception of representatives of the two nations, the nature of the relationships being established and the potential growth of mixed couples.

Anita Brzozowska



PhD, sociologist focusing on labour and family migration, integration and socio-economic mobility. Her academic interests also include the methodology of social sciences. As a researcher at the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw, she has been involved in many projects that aimed to provide background knowledge on the layers of the vulnerability of foreign workers on the one hand and the integration of migrants on the other. PhD student at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the University of Warsaw and a collaborator at the Centre of Migration Research. Research interests include the issues of social activity of migrants, their participation in the life of the host society and the functioning of the support network.

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Editors of CMR Spotlight: Michał Nowosielski, Dominika Pszczółkowska

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CENTRE OF
MIGRATION
RESEARCH

Pasteura street 7
02-093 Warsaw
Tel/fax +48 22 55 46 770
e-mail: migration.cmr@uw.edu.pl
www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/en/

