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Essential and disposable: racial capitalism and Polish migrant workers

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 exacerbated existing global racial inequalities, deepening already precarious lives of many racialised migrant workers and pushing them further into vulnerability in the UK labour market. In this paper, we analyse primary data collected as part of a mixed-method study on migrant essential workers in the UK, focusing on the Polish community. This paper extends the scope of theoretical applications of racial capitalism to Eastern Europe to better understand how the lives of Polish essential workers, as both Eastern Europeans and migrant workers, are shaped by hierarchies, marginalisation and exclusion in the workplace. We argue that Polish migrant workers are expected to occupy, and remain within, a distinct role in the UK economy as able indestructible bodies and are disciplined for any attempts to move up, across or to challenge their allotted role within this racialised system.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified global structural inequalities, further impacting disadvantaged populations (Ali, Asaria, and Stranges 2020). To keep economies going during pandemic lockdowns, some had their low-paid and low-status jobs rebranded as ‘essential’ and were expected to keep on working (Heindlmaier and Kobler 2023), with their workplaces becoming spaces of danger, exacerbating an embedded precariousness of their professions (Cai et al. 2021). For migrant workers who are often overrepresented in these industries, the pandemic further deepened existing racialised hierarchies (Bergfeld and Jørgensen 2023). Scholars observed these scenarios playing out globally, from migrant workers in Singapore (Ye 2021) to undocumented Bangladeshi workers in Greece (Kukreja 2021), and Filipinos in Irish fisheries (Marschke and Vandergeest 2023). For the Eastern European migrant community in the UK, there have been a number of ‘unsettling events’ (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) in recent years, such as the 2008 economic crisis and the cost-of-living crisis, with both Brexit and COVID happening

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in between. For those working in sectors such as health care, food production and transport, the pandemic meant that their already precarious lives were further negatively impacted with more strain on their work hours, pay, social and cultural ties, as well as their health (Gawlewicz et al. 2024). Many Eastern Europeans were flown into countries such as the UK, Germany and Austria on charter flights to work on farms, in factories, and to do care work, even when this posed a great risk to their own lives (Popovici 2021).

To better understand the relational position of Eastern European migrant workers in the UK, we consider the semi-peripheral role of Eastern Europe within the broader system of racial capitalism (Kalmar 2025) and the ambiguous racialisation of Eastern European labour migrants (Lewicki 2023). We also acknowledge Eastern Europe's complex entanglement with colonialism (as both on the receiving end of colonial expansion projects and as its beneficiaries), making its relationship with whiteness and racialisation contradictory and unstable (Balogun 2020; Grzechnik 2024).

In this paper, we analyse how Polish migrants who were also essential workers were physically and mentally stretched by being expected to manifest resilience during COVID-19. Despite the often-held assumption of equal labour rights across the EU, the reality of many Eastern European migrant workers is permeated by precarity (Katona and Zacharenko 2021). Often overqualified and underpaid for the positions they hold in the Western European labour market (Felbo-Kolding, Leschke, and Spreckelsen 2019; Holzinger 2025), they struggle to accomplish stability (Manolova 2019). As Europeans who are racialised as 'off-white' (Baker et al. 2024), they occupy a marginal position in UK racial and labour hierarchies that has deep and often detrimental effects on their lives. Even if their proximity to whiteness often translates to better working conditions than those of migrants from outside Europe (Marschke and Vandergeest 2023), their 'Eastern Europeanness' determines their precarious place in the Western labour market (Lewicki and Probst 2026).

In this paper, we theorise labour precarity and racialisation of Polish migrant workers through the framework of racial capitalism, building on work employing racial capitalism in the study of labour-force racialisation (Piro and Sacchetto 2021). We respond to scholars calling for the need to go beyond theoretical engagements with racial capitalism to show the specificities and examples of sites where racial capitalism operates, focusing beyond the North American context (Clare et al. 2022). Our contribution extends the theory of racial capitalism to Eastern Europe, showing how Polish migrant workers in the UK are positioned as 'indestructible' labour and disciplined when they attempt to move beyond their assigned roles within the system. We show that when attached to the bodies of Eastern European migrant workers, racial capitalism operates both through extreme forms of exploitation and also through more subtle forms, for example through disciplining behaviour, undermining skills, withdrawing support, and finally, being made disposable.

To flesh this out, we start by anchoring our paper theoretically, focusing on locating racialisation and labour precarity of Polish migrant workers within the framework of racial capitalism. We then present our data in three empirical sections, where we show how the pandemic amplified the precarity and disposability of racialised Polish migrant essential workers in the UK. Finally, we return to racial capitalism and the significance of this lens for a deeper understanding of Eastern European migrant lives.

Racial capitalism, racialisation and labour precarity of Polish migrants

Eastern Europe has long been constituted as Europe's internal 'Other', positioned in a state of semi-peripherality between the Western core and non-Western peripheries (Boatcă 2007). As numerous scholars have established, the region of Central and Eastern Europe is central, not marginal, to global race formations (Baker et al. 2024; Drnovšek Zorko 2019). Historically, this has manifested through Poland's position as both a victim of German and Soviet colonialism (Kopp 2012; Mayblin et al. 2016), as well as its role as coloniser of its Eastern Borderlands (Snochowska Gonzales 2012; Zarycki 2014) and active engagement in colonial ambitions overseas (Balogun 2018; Grzechnik 2024) as well as perpetuating violence towards its own racial minorities, such as Jews, Roma and Muslim communities (Krzemiński 2002; Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr 2017; Shmidt and Jaworsky 2020). These entanglements locate Poland in a racially ambiguous space where Poles, as Eastern Europeans, are positioned as 'peripherally white' (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Urbańska 2026; Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine 2022; Kalmar 2022; Safuta 2018) but striving towards full inclusion into Whiteness (Krivonos 2026). Today, this also directly translates to continued racial violence in Poland, whether through escalated anti-Ukrainian sentiments (Krivonos 2026; Mayblin et al. 2016) or through direct violence at the Polish-Belarusian border targeting migrants from outside Europe (Fiałkowska and Judzińska 2025). This is also evident when Poles move abroad, namely through their racial Othering of non-white populations (Narkowicz 2023). Poland's role in these local and global racial hierarchies can partially be understood through the (continuously remade) project of European whiteness. Being peripheral to it but striving towards inclusion – as Krivonos makes clear (2026) – is the distinctive feature of racial capitalism in an Eastern European context.

Locating racial capitalism in Eastern Europe

Attention to the topic of racial capitalism has grown in recent years, emphasising the need to consider capitalism and racism as interlinked rather than as separate phenomena. The starting point of thinking through the lens of racial capitalism is that capitalism was always structured alongside racial hierarchies (Kundnani 2020). So rather than being a variety of capitalism, racial capitalism is a corrective that shows the differentiating nature of capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018). The term has its origins in South Africa and the anti-apartheid struggle (Levenson and Paret 2023) as well as being credited to Cedric Robinson (1983) who in his magnum opus on Black Marxism centred race and racial differentiation as 'key components of how classed identities were imagined' (Ashe 2020, np). For some scholars, however, whose work is situated in the context of European imperialism, the term racial capitalism seems redundant because capitalism has always been a system based on racial difference and racial hierarchies, in other words capitalism *is* colonialism (Bhambra and Holmwood 2023). For those of us working on Eastern Europe, the term racial capitalism necessarily stresses the racial in capitalism, which we find is often missed when thinking through Eastern European migrations to the West. Following Krivonos (2023), we argue that a study of Eastern European migrant workers through the lens of racial capitalism allows us to show how the production of racial difference plays out within Europe's peripheries and how the

racialisation of Eastern Europeans and their position as ‘off-white’ but aspiring towards whiteness sustains racial capitalism, allowing for their subordination in the service of Western economies. The exploitation of Eastern European migrant workers today continues a longer historical tradition of an Eastern European cheap labour force that dates to the dawn of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983). Without suggesting a linear historical connection between Slavs then and Eastern European workers now, we find it useful to trace Robinson’s story of the emergence of racial capitalist exploitation to its margins, including in Eastern Europe (Kelley 2017, 3):

The first European proletarians were racial subjects (Irish, Jews, Roma or Gypsies, Slavs, etc.) and they were victims of dispossession (enclosure), colonialism, and slavery within Europe.

The idea that Eastern Europe and the ‘Slavic race’ were subordinate, uncivilised, lagging behind Western Europe and needing to sustain a ‘lower’ value life served as explanation and justification of their exploitation (Boatcă 2013a; Jaworska 2011; Tibebu 2011; Ureña Valerio 2019). Eastern Europeans were serving as a reservoir of cheap labour for the Western capitalist economy already in the 16th and 17th centuries (Boatcă 2013b; Lewicki 2023). These flows of cheap migrant labour from Eastern Europe, to take on so-called ‘dirtier’ jobs, took on a new prominence after the Cold War when postsocialist Europe got absorbed into Western capitalist systems (Kalmar 2023), ushering a new era of westward migrations of precarious workers. This is also a time when scholarship on Eastern Europe was inspired by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives with seminal works problematising the region’s peripheral position in Europe (Todorova 2009; Wolff 1994; Zarycki 2014). In the last decade, there has been a proliferation of deeper engagements with race, racialisation and whiteness in Eastern Europe, including on labour migration from East to West (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine 2022; Drnovšek Zorko 2019; Garapich 2016; Krivonos 2023, 2025; Manolova 2019; Narkowicz, Gawlewicz, and Pędziwiatr 2025; Rzepniowska 2019; Safuta 2025) and more recently, through the theoretical framework of racial capitalism (Kalmar 2023; Krivonos 2023; Rexhepi 2023). This work shows how Eastern European migrants have been allocated a distinctive, if ambiguous, positionality in West European racial hierarchies as a result of the peripheralisation of the region (Lewicki 2023). This racialisation operates within a capitalist system that is sustained by the exploitation of racialised, often migrant, bodies including those of Eastern Europeans (Krivonos 2023).

Labour precarity of Polish migrants

Despite the equalising promise of the EU freedom of movement (Favell 2008), Eastern European migrants have become one of the most vulnerable groups in the post-2004 segmented European labour market and are positioned in the UK as a ‘migratory supply for low-skilled labour’ (D’Angelo and Kofman 2018). Polish post-accession emigration peaked in 2017.

with over 1 million living in the UK alone (GUS 2021). Initially, migration strategies of many Poles were ‘intentionally unpredictable’, so they undertook precarious employment without holding fixed settlement or return plans (Eade, Drinkwater, and Garapich

2007). While initially labelled as ‘liquid migration’, intra-European mobility has shifted since (Bygnes and Erdal 2017). Polish migrants have become more sedentary and embedded over time in the UK (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Ryan 2022) seeking the stability of a ‘normal’ life (Galasińska and Kozłowska 2009). This is reflected in the latest 2021 Census data for England and Wales showing that six out of 10 residents who were born in Poland arrived over 10 years ago (ONS 2022).

Despite living in the UK long term, many skilled Poles are overrepresented among jobs requiring lower skills. For example, 20% of Poles working in routine occupations held higher qualifications, while it was the case for only 9% born in the UK (ONS 2022). The position of migrants from Eastern Europe, including Poles, which was already more insecure and unstable due to being located in the segments of temporary and fluid employment, became more precarious due to Brexit and subsequent increase in welfare conditionality (Duda-Mikulin 2023). This precarity was further exposed during the COVID pandemic showing not only a lack of income stability, but also their lack of security, the ineffectiveness of governmental protection as ‘key workers’, and a lack of control over the labour situation (Trlifajová and Formánková 2023). In the first year of the pandemic, the number of Poles permanently living in the UK decreased to 850,000 (ONS 2021). Although migration from Eastern Europe was triggered in response to gaps in sectors requiring a ‘flexible workforce’, during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of low-skilled and precarious jobs were relabelled as ‘essential work’ (Heindlmaier and Kobler 2023). While some scholars have welcomed the opportunity this opened to challenge the traditional hierarchy regarding whose work is valued (Bergfeld and Farris 2020), others have argued that this resulted in further precarity of poor racialised workers (Haritaworn 2022).

Our paper advances literature on racial capitalism by extending it to the study of Eastern European migration to the West and demonstrates how racial capitalism operates through the racialisation of ambiguously white groups, such as Poles. We will show that when attached to the off-white bodies of Eastern European workers, racial capitalism works through both overt exploitation and through more subtle forms of disciplining, rendering them as disposable when no longer productive.

Methods: researching Polish essential workers in the UK

This article is based on data collected in the study ‘Health, social, economic and cultural impacts of COVID-19 on migrant essential workers in the UK’. Poles were selected as the largest group of Eastern European migrants in the UK, with inflows changing in their nature over the last two decades in response to Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Our data were collected online in 2021. The study aimed to better understand how the pandemic affected the lives of people who were in a condition of dual vulnerability: being both a migrant and an essential worker. We conducted mixed methods research, starting with a large online survey (N = 1,105), distributed via Facebook ads and using a mix of convenient sampling techniques suitable for recruitment of hard-to-reach populations, such as sharing survey invitations on targeted social media groups, through our partner organisations, and the Polish Embassy (Piekut 2024). We followed this by conducting in-depth interviews with Polish migrant essential workers (N = 40) and experts from various support organisations (N = 10). Additionally, over 300 survey respondents

replied to an open question asking about the impact of the pandemic on their lives. Statistics were weighted proportionally to reflect the size of the Polish migrant population across UK countries. We rely on data from the qualitative interviews and survey respondents (SR) who were given pseudonyms with the following information: SR number or pseudonym, gender, age group, sector.

We applied the ‘following a thread’ approach in our mixed-methods data analysis and integration process (O’Caitlain et al. 2010). This method allows progressing with data analysis iteratively moving between both types of data. We began with an initial analysis of qualitative and quantitative components to identify key themes and patterns in Polish essential workers experiences. After the qualitative corpus of data was coded in Nvivo, we extracted materials for themes related to work experiences (‘racism’, ‘positionality of Poles’ and ‘perceptions of essential workers’) and reanalysed them with the lens of racial capitalism. We identified three themes indicating how racial capitalism impacts Polish essential workers, and then we moved back to the survey data to explore patterns in work discrimination across main characteristics related to racialised experiences: sector, education level, migration status and length of residency. In this paper, while we mainly rely on our rich qualitative material (interviews and open responses from survey), we contextualise it with insights from the survey (full results are reported in Table A1).

According to our survey with Polish essential workers in the UK, and in comparison to all essential workers in England and Wales (ONS 2020), Polish migrant essential workers more often worked in food and other necessary goods production, processing, sales or delivery than other essential workers (34.5% of our respondents versus 14% of all essential workers). The second largest occupational group in our survey sample was workers in health and social care at 28.5% (28% of all essential workers). Additionally, 9.6% worked in transport, 7% in utility services, 4.8% in communication and financial services, and the remaining 13.6% in various public sector and security sectors. Polish essential workers in our sample were less often employed than all essential workers in education and childcare (7% vs 20%). In our sample, highly educated people (57%) were overrepresented as compared to all Poles in the 2021 Census of England and Wales (35%), as well as women comprising 61% of the survey sample (55% in the Census), reflecting study focus on essential work sectors where both some ‘skilled’ and ‘feminised’ jobs are more common, for example, in health, social care and education. Our qualitative sample was balanced across gender, essential work sector, job type and location in the UK. It included 15 participants in foods and necessary goods, 10 in health and social care, 5 in utility services, 4 in transport, 4 in teaching and childcare and 2 in public safety/national security. Despite the majority of our migrant interview participants being highly educated (28 out of 40), around a third had a part-time job and a few managed multiple jobs.

Results

We identified a double precarity operating through the mechanisms of racial capitalism; that of Poles as Eastern Europeans and as essential workers. We present the findings in three key sections. In the first section, we focus on how Polish migrant workers in the UK feel devalued because of being Eastern Europeans working in so-called ‘dirty jobs’ (Favell

2008). We then map what happened when the pandemic struck, highlighting how workers who were already racialised and undervalued were pushed to work more, harder and with less protection and state support. Finally, we analyse the impact on Polish migrant essential workers, highlighting how racial capitalism produces and sustains their precarity, at times with devastating consequences.

Polish migrant worker: reliable, cheap, and lesser

The stereotype of the Polish migrant worker is perhaps best epitomised in the tropes of the ‘Polish plumber’, ‘Polish builder’ or ‘Polish cleaner’ (Garapich 2016). It conveys a generally good work ethic but imbued within that is also an understanding that Poles occupy lower status jobs and that they work hard despite lower salaries and rarely complain, making them a desirable workforce (MacKenzie and Forde 2009). Within this somewhat tired narrative of the Polish labourer there is a more sinister reality; that of an exploitable and almost indestructible Eastern European migrant who works too much for too little, leading to detrimental impacts on their wellbeing. The system of racial capitalism also relies on the worker to remain in their exploited position. As we will show below, attempts to move up, across or to challenge an allotted position within this system are disciplined.

Since the 2004 EU accession, Poles arriving in the UK benefited from their position as ‘paler migrants’ accessing a labour market that was welcoming to them while remaining restricted to those from outside Europe (Bhambra 2017). For many, Brexit and the accompanying racialised aggression towards Eastern Europeans were a ‘wake-up’ call where their imagined invisibility and status were questioned and their sense of belonging disrupted, resulting in them feeling ‘undesirable’ and deprived of white privilege (Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska 2021; Rzepnikowska 2019). One of our expert interviewees from a charity organisation serving the Polish community talked about the growing public discourse about migrants taking over jobs and depriving the local population of public services, now also targeting them:

Poles stopped feeling wanted here ... Because we are here there are less jobs, less spaces in schools, less spaces in hospitals ... you just feel it. (Expert interview 1)

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and with increased reliance on Eastern European workforce, the impression that one was not needed turned out to be far from accurate (Doward 2020). However, being needed does not translate to being wanted. The need for Eastern European labour rests on the logic of racial capitalism and requires it to be cheap, reliable, but also lesser – which is why it can be exploited and sacrificed for the wellbeing of the general community for whom Eastern European lives are expected to be sacrificed (E.A.S.T 2021). While being officially described as ‘essential’, 28% of survey participants replied that they do not feel equal as migrant workers, and this was highest among workers in the health and care sector (37%), as one survey participant’s reflection illustrated:

It has also been very hard to tolerate constant abuse from patients [...] especially when I was potentially putting my life and my husband’s life at risk to help them. The abuse has been far greater than I have ever seen as a health care professional, even at the time of “clap for carers”. (SR328, W, mid 30s, health & care)

Crucially, the perception was fairly common among participants with and without higher education or with different lengths of residency (see Table A1), reflecting that discriminatory behaviour in the workplace is experienced by Poles with different skill levels and across different sectors:

Sometimes you need to work harder than people, despite the same qualifications. (Robert, M, early 30s, teaching & childcare)

When people ask you where you are from and you say Poland ... there is a sense that we are perceived as a little bit lesser. (Mariusz, M, early 30s, food & necessary good)

I feel, as I am of a worse kind, yes? Still, I have the tendency to think that I am not educated here, I am not from here ... I still speak with an accent. (SR321, W, early 20s, communication & financial sector)

Because of their ambiguous whiteness, the way Eastern Europeans tend to be distinguished and racialised is through language (Holzinger 2025; Lulle 2022; Rosa 2019; Temple 2010). In our survey, 28% of respondents said that they were not comfortable speaking Polish at work, and it was most common among those with insecure migration status and living in the UK for less than five years (35-36%), yet still not a rare experience for those with citizenship or long-term residents (15-16%), or those with higher education (25%). There was also discomfort around speaking English as a migrant with a Polish accent. Ewa works as kitchen help in a care home in Wales. She is in her 30s and has been living in the UK for around a decade. Although working in a low-skilled job on a part-time basis, Ewa holds two master's degrees from Poland. In her interactions with the carers who work in the care home where she serves food, she reported on a few unpleasant interactions where she felt that she was teased for her language, despite being told it was a joke:

A few times when I was serving food, the carers stood nearby and suddenly started mocking me. Later they said that I have a 'nice accent' ... it completely knocked me off balance. They laughed about how I say "carrots" ... it's hard to say whether it was because they liked how I said it, as they claimed, or if they were actually mocking me. (Ewa, W, mid-30s, Wales, food & necessary goods)

Accents (along with surnames and clothing) are modalities through which the racialisation of Eastern Europeans operates (Krivonos 2026). In a racial capitalist system, Eastern European accents, surnames, sounds and 'looks' are bound up with unequal relations of exchange. Thus, having an Eastern European accent within the system of racial capitalism automatically translates to a lesser value. When her colleagues react to her accent, despite saying they like it, Ewa instantly recognises that as something derogatory. An Eastern European accent, Ewa knows, is not one expected to be attached to a migrant body with multiple academic degrees but rather to one who can be ridiculed, mispronounced and assigned a place within 'racialised hierarchies of value' (Krivonos 2026, 128).

There were several other instances where interviewees spoke of being disciplined and this was often in the context of them disrupting the expectation of their role, sometimes by attempting to climb up in their position at work (Holzinger 2025). For some of them, their ability to communicate in Polish in their roles as essential workers to a large Polish migrant population was considered beneficial and sometimes their role depended on having these language capabilities. Yet frequently, the very thing of language that was

so essential in their job was also used against them in various disciplining practices by their coworkers and managers.

One example of disciplining through language comes from Basia, who works as a social worker in England and arrived shortly after EU accession in 2005, making her another long-term resident. Because of the growing need for social workers to reach the Polish community, her Polishness was considered an asset. However, not long after starting her job with the local authority, it turned out to be a double-edged sword. She was told that Polish clients had to speak English with her, and if they did not, Basia would need an interpreter otherwise she was risking a 'conflict of interest'. Basia initially accepted the comment because the colleague expressing this was senior to her, English and thus 'knew better'. But on her way home in the car, Basia started feeling uneasy:

What would I need a translator for anyway? Would a translator translate from Polish to Polish? [...] And then I thought, would she make such a comment to her English colleague who watches an English family, that it is a conflict of interest? (Basia, W, mid 40s, health and care)

Basia felt that the suggestion that she would not be objective in her role as social worker observing a family from Poland was offensive and undermined her professionalism. She felt there was an assumption that she couldn't be left 'unsupervised' with only Polish being spoken in the room. For Basia, this was the culmination of a set of disciplining behaviours from her colleagues, making her feel as if she needed to prove herself as a social worker because she had already disrupted a certain hierarchy:

There is this sense of superiority ... And we are a threat. (Basia, W, mid 40s, health & care)

Such disciplining was common and often targeted those who attempted to transcend their expected position as a migrant essential worker from Eastern Europe (Sirkeci, Acik, and Saunders 2014). A similar experience was shared by Dominika, who works in a factory and has advanced to a position of 'chargehand' where she manages a few people. She said that when it came to those colleagues who were locals rather than migrant workers, she felt slight resentment from them because she was a Polish migrant worker who held a higher position at work. As Daria Krivonos (2026, 89) argues, the refusal to recognise racialised subjects' skills, ambition and experiences is 'crucial for the reproduction of racial capitalism'.

In the three examples above of disciplining in the workplace, the Polish migrants' position in the labour market is intimately woven with their position in the East–West racial hierarchies. Disciplining migrant workers has the aim of creating the 'ideal worker', i.e. one that works hard and accepts less pay for the sake of capital accumulation (Harrison and Lloyd 2012). The act of disciplining happened even to those Polish workers who were in a position of authority, indicating that within the system of racial capitalism, the Eastern European worker is required to remain in a subordinate position within the racial and classed hierarchies of the UK labour market. Our participants employed various coping strategies; Basia's was to not disclose her professional qualifications, while Dominika's was to tread softly at work and not seem 'too bossy', even as a manager. The sentiments expressed above echo a pervasive feeling of not being considered good enough to enjoy basic privileges and certainly not good enough to

advance in the labour market hierarchies because when they did, this was read as punching above one's weight. In this sense, whiteness allows them some, albeit limited, wiggle room to advance in their position, but they are not 'white enough' to be granted respite from 3D 'dirty, dangerous and dull' jobs (Favell 2008; Narkowicz 2023). As Krivonos (2026) shows, racial capitalism does not only operate through extreme exploitation but also through persistent daily struggles including feeling valuable, having one's skills recognised and deserving welfare when needed.

On the front lines without support: essential and precarious

Since the start of the Covid 19 until now [2021], I have changed jobs eight times. (SR10, W, mid 40s, food & necessary goods)

A majority (65%) of survey participants reported that their employment situation changed during the pandemic via hours reduction, being furloughed and taking on multiple jobs. Many faced severe work and financial instability when they were at the forefront of pandemic struggles as essential workers. Almost 40% of respondents claimed their financial situation had deteriorated since the start of the pandemic, with about half of those working in sectors providing critical services and goods during lockdowns. Those employed in utility services were especially precarious:

Our finances are much worse than before the pandemic. Unfortunately, we have been using a food bank for a year / ... / Returning to normality is a dream. (SR28, W, mid 40s, utility services)

My financial situation has deteriorated because out of three adults, I'm the only one who has not stopped working and we are behind in our payments. (SR87, W, mid 50s, utility services)

It was not uncommon for Polish essential workers to have a temporary or otherwise unstable contract and to struggle with the cost of living. While 40% of all respondents were dissatisfied with their pay, it was higher among those without secure migration status (50%), with 75% of them experiencing some change in their employment situation or contract. One survey respondent got a cash in hand job in a restaurant just before the first lockdown and when the restaurant closed, he was left with no money. The job precarity of those working in low-wage frontline sectors was amplified by broader social precarity. Polish migrants in the UK often lack extended networks in the country and benefit from living transnational lives to support each other with family care and healthcare. As such, their life security and stability have been unsettled first by Brexit and then by the COVID pandemic (Kloc-Nowak and Ryan 2024). What emerges is a bleak picture suggesting that because of their insecure position in British society compounded by several intersecting vulnerabilities including lack of know-how, a sense of being treated as 'lesser', insufficient language skills, and a general social isolation made worse by the pandemic, Polish essential workers were stretched to their limits and made to feel precarious despite their labour being essential (E.A.S.T 2021). Some reported feeling frustrated because despite performing the same jobs as their British counterparts, they were not given similar benefits.

British people always get ... More hours, better hours ... and if they have a choice, they first give to their British colleagues. And later to Polish workers. (Mira, W, early 40s, food & necessary goods)

Another survey participant told us that despite working as an essential worker, she was not allowed to keep her children at school. This was the effect of conflicting messages at the time and an initial exclusion of cleaners from the category of essential workers (International Workplace 2021; UK Government 2020). To be able to manage school runs and after-school care, she swapped to night shifts at work, planning for this to be a temporary arrangement. But soon enough her contract permanently changed from full-time to part-time and day-shifts to night-shifts, demonstrating how under racial capitalism migrant workers are not afforded entitlements for rest and reproduction (Siegmann, Ivošević, and Visser 2025) and instead expected to be available at any time and considered disposable if they do not comply (Krivonos 2026).

[The manager] offered me a new contract with fewer hours and in the evening because the company said that I was unable to work during the day due to the children, because I had to stay with them due to the pandemic. And I had the choice to either accept their conditions or take my severance pay and resign. (SR15, W, mid 30, utility services)

Representatives of organisations supporting Poles spoke about barriers and hostility in navigating the system in order to seek benefits even when one is eligible (Dwyer et al. 2019). A support worker presented how the daily cycle of life under racial capitalism plays out for Polish migrants working in factories and living in what she referred to as 'Polish ghettos' isolated from wider society. She portrays a monotonous image of tired bodies working akin to machines (Siegmann, Ivošević, and Visser 2025), day in and day out:

They go to work, sort their carrots, fish, chickens, come home and pay their bills, and watch Polish TV, and in the morning go again to sort their chickens, carrots, potatoes. They don't care, they don't have access, they just can't ... (Expert interview 2)

In several of our expert interviews, the respondents pointed out the extreme precarity of many in the Polish community, linking it to broader issues of deprivation and ill-health for a community that struggles to access services in the UK (Lakasing and Mirza 2009; Osipović 2013). When the option of informal support was no longer available due to pandemic travel restrictions and cost, some of our participants turned to their employers and to the state for help – often encountering a closed door and being unable to receive any formal support in form of benefits, sick leave, bonuses or health care. The state support provided for essential workers during the pandemic was not extended to the precarious migrant essential workers:

All us who working every day get nothing, no help for kids or any extra benefits for working in pandemic time. (SR17, M, late 30, food & necessary goods)

What the pandemic exposed is how mobility of migrant workers made them easily exploitable under racial capitalism (Khalili 2023). Societies rely on the 'restless bodies' of migrant workers without acknowledgement that their intensive mobility is caused by the failures of the system to provide care for them (Apostolova 2021; Stewart and Sanders 2023). This negatively impacts their lives, resulting in social isolation, restricted access to healthcare, and safe living and working conditions, which can lead to sickness and (in some extreme cases) deaths. In the next and final section, we ask what happens when the bodies of migrant workers – expendable and assumed to be indestructible – fall ill, get burned out, and are no longer able to fulfil their assumed and expected role in the system.

Expendable and disposable: the mechanisms of racial capitalism

The ‘success story’ of the Eastern European migrant worker within the system of racial capitalism relied on them working more, often for less, and in more precarious working conditions (Lewicki and Probst 2026). Consequently, when they were unable to get access to benefits after the pandemic struck, whether because they lost their jobs or worked so hard that they needed additional support with childcare, this often led to burnout, illness and sometimes resulted in the inability to perform their job. When bodies whose value lies in over-performing in the labour market are rendered unworkable, they not only become inessential, but are also abandoned and made superfluous (Mbembe 2016). And when they are no longer useful to the upholding of the racial capitalist system, they are easily replaced or disposed of. One survey participant, resident in the UK for over a decade, reflected in her open response that:

[w]hat the pandemic has shown very clearly is how both the government and my employer have a mouth full of platitudes, but really “essential worker” means you are disposable. (SR178, W, late 40, teaching & childcare)

Despite Dominika’s permanent and seemingly stable job position, she remembered a time at the beginning of the pandemic when she told her manager at the factory (where no physical distancing was enforced) that she was concerned about contracting COVID and was told that she was free to leave the job, which made her feel disposable. Another participant, Renata, aptly summarised the way the employers exploit migrant workers when she said that *if you work a lot and work like a robot (laughs), they’ll give you some opportunities, so that they can further benefit from you* (Renata, F, early 40s, transport). In this sense, if one is performing to the level of a machine (Siegmann, Ivošević, and Visser 2025), opportunities can open up. However, this relies on one’s own dehumanisation or, as one of Renata’s colleagues summarised, Eastern Europeans coming to the UK *do[ing] everything you are told, like dogs*.

Expendable essential workers are those whose labour, despite being deemed essential, continues to be undervalued (Pandey, Parreñas, and Sabio 2021). The myth of expendability, as Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018) notes, is central to racial capitalism as it runs on the assumption that some populations will always be surplus populations available to pick up when the current workforce are no longer able to perform the job. When racialised migrant workers’ bodies are no longer productive, they are ‘cut loose’, and because their bodies are not deemed worthy of protection, no care is afforded to them, thus rendering the essential workers not only inessential but disposable (Kukreja 2021).

My employer doesn’t care about the health of their employees. What matters to this company is cutting costs. (SR123, W, early 20s, health & social care)

During the pandemic essential workers were more likely to get infected with COVID-19, and this also had a racial dimension (Ali, Asaria, and Stranges 2020). Among our survey participants, 39% claimed to be in close contact with others while at work or travelling to work. There was also a feeling of being deprioritised for PPE. Strikingly, 65% of respondents believed their access to PPE was worse than for British workers. This number was higher (75%) for those who had lived in the UK for 15 years and longer. As Junjia Ye (2021) notes in the case of Singapore, migrants during the pandemic were rendered both victims and threats. Without institutional or employer support or protective

measures in place, the onus was on the workers themselves to not get sick, despite not being given any protection. When they did get infected and the threat of disease-spreading became real, they were then stigmatised as public health risks (Kukreja 2021). Participants recalled similar situations, particularly in factories across the UK, where Eastern European workers were stigmatised for getting infected with COVID:

The folks who work at the factory are considered a threat by the locals ... it has caused tension in that community. (Expert interview 3)

As Jin Haritaworn (2022) emphasises, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the necropolitical divisions between those who are living and whose lives are valued and those who are relegated to the living dead. In other words, between the populations who were protected and those who were sacrificed. Because, as it became clear from our data, the Polish essential workers were only needed as long as they were productive at the rate of a machine, obedient and largely self-sufficient. When they were no longer able to produce or when they sought support (often for the first time) they were often rejected, thus reminded of their disposable position within the system of racial capitalism.

Conclusion

The level of dependence on workers from Eastern Europe in the upkeep of Western economies became starkly apparent during the COVID pandemic. This further cemented the idea of Europe's East as a place of cheap and expendable labour (Lewicki 2023), which has a longer historical trajectory dating back to early East–West labour migrations at the dawn of capitalist expansion (Boatcă 2013a). The historical peripheralisation of Eastern Europe within intra-European racial regimes (Antonucci and Varriale 2020) feeds into the current racialisation of Eastern European migrant workers (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Urbańska 2026). This has become more pronounced since the entrance of Eastern Europe into the capitalist world economy, making the region a steady supplier of labour – especially in sectors such as health and care work, agriculture, food and transport – to Western Europe (Karkov 2019; Lewicki and Probst 2026; Rogaly 2021).

Our findings emerged from a mixed-methods study that analysed primary data gathered from interviews with Polish migrant essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK coupled with a large online survey (N = 1,105). Building on the scholarship on Eastern European migrant racialisation and labour precarity, we explored the interlocking impacts caused by events such as Brexit and COVID on Polish migrant workers through the theoretical lens of racial capitalism. Our mixed-methods data corroborate and complement each other, demonstrating that study participants who were more vulnerable in the labour market – as lower skilled, working in sectors with less secure employment and those who were recent migrants – experienced more discrimination. Participant testimonials expanded further on survey patterns, revealing the more overt systems in place with lack of institutional support and permanent precarity. The Polish migrant workers with higher skills or holding supervisory or leadership roles faced more subtle forms of disciplining in line with racialised hierarchies at work and were penalised for crossing them – for example, through language/accents shaming or by being held back at work and rendered as lacking professionalism. As Krivonos (2026) argues, these more subtle gradations of difference are a structural feature of

racial capitalism and, we add, are a specificity of racial capitalism structuring Eastern European migrant workers' lives.

When migrants whose essentiality relied on their dehumanisation were unable to work due to the compounding pressures of Brexit and then COVID on top of an already precarious existence, they became 'worthless' to the system that was never designed to care for them, thus revealing the insidious mechanisms of racial capitalism when attached to the off-white bodies of Eastern Europeans (Baker et al. 2024). Because of their proximity to whiteness and thus relative privilege, Polish migrant workers' experiences under racial capitalism differ from those of migrant workers from the Global South (Kukreja 2021; Marschke and Vandergeest 2023). Still, we found some overlaps in the ways that racialised migrant workers from the peripheries and semi-peripheries of global capitalism were expected to work with their 'heads bowed down' because they had 'so much to lose' (Kukreja 2021, 93), being dehumanised through comparisons to machines (Siegmann, Ivošević, and Visser 2025) and dogs, and considered a threat to local populations (Kukreja 2021; Ye 2021). Our findings expand theoretical engagements with racial capitalism to the study of intra-European racism and racialisation of ambiguously white migrant populations from Europe's margins. With Khalili (2023, 4), we see a capaciousness in the concept of racial capitalism that allows it to be 'shapeshifting and context-specific', and with this our paper responds to the call from critical scholars (Clare et al. 2022, 2) for studies on 'actually existing' racial capitalisms 'across a variety of sites and scales' beyond North America and – we will add – Western Europe. We look forward to future engagements with racial capitalism in the study of Europe's East, with particular attention to its shifting, ambiguous and nesting racial hierarchies.

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Author contributions

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Appendix

Table A1. COVID-19 (C19) pandemic impact and perceived discrimination across education levels, sectors, status and length of residency (%).

	Financially worse off since C19 pandemic	Not satisfied with pay	Not comfortable speaking Polish	Not feeling equal as a PL migrant worker	Disagrees PPE access the same as for UK workers
Total	38.5	42.0	28.2	27.9	64.7
Education					
No higher education	45.4	45.7	32.1	28.3	60.0
Higher education	33.1	39.0	25.2	27.8	68.3
Sector					
Health & social care	28.7	47.3	30.3	37.1	64.4
Prod., sale & delivery of necessary goods	50.6	42.6	32.4	23.8	62.0
Utility services	52.3	47.7	22.3	27.5	55.7
Transport	38.4	37.2	21.4	24.6	70.7
Education & childcare	33.8	42.2	22.3	23.0	69.1
Other sectors	23.7	29.6	24.5	23.8	69.7
Migration status					
Citizenship/ Residency	28.3	28.4	15.1	23.5	69.6
Settled status	37.9	42.1	29.0	28.0	65.2
Pre-settled, none or not sure	46.6	51.4	34.5	30.8	60.4
Length of residency					
Up to 5 years	46.6	49.1	35.6	29.2	56.8
5–9 years	38.2	39.4	30.6	28.2	63.1
10–14 years	38.2	44.6	27.3	29.6	68.0
15 years and more	30.3	33.3	16.5	23.4	74.6

Note: in bold chi2 test difference significant at least at $p < 0.05$ level and it was calculated for three levels of measurement (positive, neutral, negative).