

# Migratory birds: Dehumanization of migrant workers in West Hungary

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## Abstract

The region of West Hungary surrounding Sopron has experienced large migrant worker inflows from rural Hungary and neighbouring countries into low-skilled jobs in pre-COVID-19 years. This research interviewed workers, labour market intermediaries, employers, and hosts to explore how the fundamental humanity of migrant workers is denied in the labour process. The paper draws on geographical research examining the embodied agency of workers and analyses the literature on dehumanization to highlight the construction of dehumanization narratives in the social relations of migrant recruitment, training, employment, and accommodation. Theoretically, the paper argues that production and reproduction sites require consideration when examining the dehumanization of migrant labour. The empirical part of the paper contributes to the literature by unpacking various dehumanization strategies involving social boundary-making based on nationality, ethnicity, and gender.

## KEYWORDS

dehumanization, Hungary, labour, low-skilled jobs, migration

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The anti-immigration campaign the governing Fidesz party launched during the 2015 European migration crisis has generally been popular with voters. However, anti-immigration narratives take specific forms in local communities, especially communities experiencing labour migration (Stojanov et al., 2021). Sopron, a medium-sized city near the Austrian border in West Hungary, has become a hub for domestic and border-crossing migrant workers in the past decade (Kiss et al., 2020). The massive influx of domestic

and foreign migrant workers has created social tensions locally (Kuslits, 2019).

Many migrant workers in West Hungary occupy precarious positions in the segmented cross-border labour market, including low-skilled factory jobs and seasonal agricultural work. Labour market intermediaries have emerged; vacant houses and motels have been converted into temporary housing for migrants. Ethnicity and gender-based boundary-making have intensified in the local community, where newcomers are labelled Roma and often depicted as dangerous non-humans (Kiss et al., 2020).

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Based on fieldwork around Sopron, this article traces actors and geographical sites in labour migration. Analytically, the paper broadens current geographical debates on dehumanizing people and labour. As Strauss (2018, 6) noted in a progress report on labour geography, we need to engage with “how the category of labour constitutes (...) what counts as human.” Most labour geography studies have dealt with moments of ethnic, racial, gender, and citizenship-based othering through the category of labour (Clark, 2017; Lee & Pratt, 2012; McDowell et al., 2007; Merrill, 2011; Strauss, 2020), and with how technology has dissolved boundaries between what counts as human in the labour process (Büscher, 2022; Kirsch & Mitchell, 2004; Kurz et al., 2017). However, less attention has been devoted to how workers are depicted and dehumanized both in their wage work and during their social reproduction and how multi-scalar social relations shape these processes. To address this research gap, we build on recent accounts of dehumanization to understand boundary-making within the workplace and temporary housing for migrants. Based primarily on interviews, we highlight different dehumanization narratives of various actors, including recruiters, employers, labour market intermediaries, workers, and accommodation hosts.

The paper aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How do other actors in the labour process (labour market intermediaries, employers, and hosts at workers' hostels) portray migrant labour as nonhuman in the specific geographical context of West Hungary? (2) How does dehumanization contribute to the exploitation and exclusion of migrant labour in production and social reproduction sites?

The first section establishes the theoretical framework. This paper briefly describes the West Hungarian labour market and the role of migrant workers within it. It then introduces the research methods. The empirical results address key geographical sites of migrant workers' dehumanization, that is, homelands and recruitment sites, workplaces, social reproduction spaces, and the City of Sopron. The present study concludes by returning to the research questions and the broader scope of the research.

## 2 | DEHUMANIZATION AND MIGRANT LABOUR

As a working definition for our case study, we understand dehumanization as the act of denying humanness to other human beings or social groups (Francis, 2019; Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015), leading to exclusion, exploitation, harm, or decreased willingness to help people stigmatized by discursive practices (Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016). Hence, we focus on cases where humanity is stripped from people's livelihoods.

Discourses on race, culture, civilization, and human versus nonhuman have been at the heart of Western thought since colonial times. Dehumanization became an immanent feature of modern capitalist labour through worker exploitation. Though it appears individual in source and nature, the systemic, institutionalized, socio-spatial nature of dehumanization demands emphasis, particularly concerning the exclusion and oppression of certain groups

(Anderson, 2001; Büscher, 2022; Francis, 2019). To understand the processes, most geographical accounts considered the role of race, ethnicity, (im)migrant/asylum-seeker status, physical/mental illness, disability, gender/sexual orientation, language, class position, age, and political preference in constructing differences between the human and nonhuman (Francis, 2019; Haslam et al., 2016; Merrill, 2011).

Each of these accounts shows that different geographical and historical contexts lead to various combinations of dehumanizing factors under the same capitalist conditions. However, previous empirical work has rarely analysed the importance of kin-state politics combined with other factors. Our case study highlights how nationality and ethnicity (domestic Hungarian guest workers; ethnic Hungarians of foreign nationality; non-Hungarians from neighbouring countries; Roma and non-Roma workers) intersect with gender and kin-state politics, that is, reaching out to transborder ethnic communities by the Hungarian state (Tátraí et al., 2017), in producing dehumanized worker subjects. We are interested in how various actors construct dehumanization at key geographical sites related to migrant work.

Many empirical works have analysed discursive forms of dehumanization to decipher the socio-spatial relations of dehumanization (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018; O'Brien, 2009). Such boundary-making practices use biological-pathological metaphors (people as disease, cancer, or epidemic), associations with natural phenomena (the influx of certain people as flood), and animal metaphors (referred to as animalization). Since animalization is predominantly derogatory, it often results in diminishing empathy towards members of targeted groups (Haslam et al., 2016), serving as a constituent element of the perpetration of intergroup violence (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015). Apart from the dehumanization of individuals and social groups by others, empirical research has also shed light on how people dehumanize themselves. The literature refers to this as self-dehumanization (Ruttan & Lucas, 2018), self-objectification (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015), auto-bestialization (Jaramillo, 2012), or antiprotopoeia (anti-personification; Kouakou, 2017). We aim to extend these studies by focusing on migrant worker experiences with dehumanization (Santa Ana, 1999; Vezovnik, 2012). We argue that the depiction of migrant labourers as nonhuman in our West Hungarian context sheds light on social relations of dehumanization beyond more oppressive geographical and historical contexts, often in the focus of previous geographical work (Clark, 2017; Francis, 2019; Harrison & Lloyd, 2011; Morin, 2016; Strauss, 2012). These earlier insights lead to our first research question examining how various actors portray migrant labour as nonhuman in different socio-spatial contexts in the labour process.

Recent scholarship highlighting how the historical trajectory of capitalist development intensifies alienation by establishing differences between humans and non-humans informs a focus on dehumanization in labour processes (Büscher, 2022; Yates, 2011). Dehumanization is coercion within local labour control regimes (Hastings, 2019) constructed at work sites and sites beyond work. The present paper also follows Morin's (2016) fruitful strategy of examining places where humanness and non-humanness are produced. Recent scholarship argues that workers are dehumanized by being portrayed as controllable or merely fungible, disposable bodies

in different spatialities (Jaramillo, 2012). Employers and managers often treat workers and migrant workers in such a manner (Econie & Dougherty, 2019; Holmes, 2013; Stojanov et al., 2021; Yates, 2011). Within this group of scholarship, Merrill (2011) underlines levels of dehumanization among nonmigrant, European migrant, and non-European migrant workers competing for low-wage jobs in Italy.

Most analyses have covered contexts of colonial, racialized, enslaved labour dehumanization in different geographies, representing severe examples of oppression (Clark, 2017; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Mitchell, 1996). However, there is a research gap in how dehumanization in the labour process occurs in European, non-colonial contexts under current neoliberal capitalism, particularly in border regions (cf. Gahman & Hjalmarson, 2019). The 2015 migration crisis in Europe and the ongoing labour migration from Eastern Europe have attracted wide scholarly attention (Ciupijus et al., 2020; Cook et al., 2010; Rye, 2018). Studies have illuminated how migrant workers are exploited and how competitiveness in labour-intensive sectors is coupled with illegality, criminalization, and state violence (Findlay & McCollum, 2013; Glick-Schiller & Çağlar, 2016; Harrison & Lloyd, 2011; Martin & Prokkola, 2017). Our case study aims to broaden the scope of these studies by focusing on the dehumanization of migrant labour in a setting where labourers migrate legally across borders and criminalization, forced labour, and local state violence are less prevalent.

Previous scholarship has only partially conceptualized dehumanization related to the social reproduction of migrant workers. Mitchell (1996) considers how agricultural guest workers in California have been treated as animals in sites of social reproduction. Ham and Ceradov (2022) explain how dehumanization is expressed by depriving migrant domestic workers of food, while Ladegaard (2022) emphasizes the more general dehumanizing practices inflicted upon domestic migrant workers. However, geography and related social sciences literature have only sparsely conceptualized the interrelation of dehumanization and labour migration throughout the labour process (Mezzadri, 2019). Following Winders and Smith (2019), we integrate the analysis of capitalist production and reproduction with an analytical strategy to examine different sites of production and reproduction, focusing on workers' dehumanization, with an empirical case study from West Hungary. This leads to our second research question, that is, what theoretical insights can be gained about migrant labour exploitation and exclusion if we examine dehumanization at geographical sites of both production and reproduction?

### 3 | THE CONTEXT OF LABOUR MIGRATION IN WEST HUNGARY

The recent labour migration to West Hungary is embedded in multi-scalar geographies of uneven development. As such, it is a direct result of how Hungary is immersed in the intra-EU division of labour, the understanding of the Hungarian state to ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries as a source of labour, the location of

Sopron at the Western border of Hungary, and the urban-rural inequalities within the region of West Hungary.

The Hungarian economic boom of the 2010s before the COVID-19 pandemic was based on uneven development within the European Union. In the past three decades, Hungarian governments have subsidized foreign direct investment into low-value-added manufacturing across the country. The latest round after the 2008 crisis was supplemented by a workfarist, pro-employment demographic, social, and taxation policy implemented by the current right-wing government, incumbent since 2010.

The relocation of manufacturing from Western Europe to West Hungary peaked in the 1990s via mainly low-value-added jobs in the automotive, wood and furniture, plastics, and rubber manufacturing industries. Labour shortages in manufacturing and the locally vital viticulture have characterized the late 2010s and early 2020s.

The labour market in neighbouring Austria is the partial cause of the labour shortage in low-skilled jobs in Sopron and its vicinity. The opening of the borders between Austria and Hungary in 2007 and the full opening of the Austrian labour market to Hungarian citizens in 2011 were significant regulatory changes in labour migration (Ciupijus et al., 2020). Wages in the Austrian part of the border region are nearly triple that of Hungarian wages (own calculations, based on Statistics Austria and Hungarian Central Statistical Office data); lower living costs in Hungary have also favoured daily commuting. Recently, non-Hungarian citizens have settled around Sopron and commute to Austria.

A 2017 questionnaire survey found that 15% of newcomers to Sopron who arrived after 2009 found employment in low-skilled jobs (Kiss et al., 2020). This share might be even higher because the survey underrepresented people living in worker hostels and other low-cost accommodations. This precarious population has segmented geographies of origin. First, domestic migrants appeared in Sopron in precarious labour market segments. Second, ethnic Hungarians have also arrived from neighbouring countries (Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine), which has been a dominant migration trajectory in other parts of the country (Melegh, 2016). Nationalist migration policies generally view ethnic Hungarians as a "good," easily integrable source of labour migration and have institutionally supported the migration of ethnic Hungarians. We will show, however, that ethnic Hungarians in precarious segments of the labour market are targets of social boundary-making, including dehumanization. Third, the non-Hungarian population from neighbouring countries has gained importance in filling low-skilled job segments in West Hungary. Labour market intermediaries (Meszmann, 2019; Meszmann & Fedyuk, 2018), kin-state politics, national citizenship policies, the possibility for non-Hungarians to acquire Hungarian citizenship and enter the European Union's labour market (Ciupijus et al., 2020; Tátrai et al., 2017), and the tens of thousands of work permits the government has issued for Ukrainians in recent years (well before the full-scale war in Ukraine) have been significant factors in this process. Boundary-making based on ethnicity has also been typical in workplaces and local communities with observable inflows of non-Hungarian workers.

Another crucial underlying process of current labour migration is the urban-rural division of labour. In Győr-Moson-Sopron County (where the city of Sopron lies), every second employee commuted to work in another municipality in 2016. Two of three commuters moved within the county (mostly to larger cities, such as Sopron), and every fourth person commuted across the border (KSH, 2017). The costs of social reproduction have also strengthened commuting, as rental prices in Sopron doubled between 2011 and 2019. As Sopron “filled up,” vacant buildings and some motels have been converted into homes for migrant workers. Houses in formerly depopulating villages have also become attractive for this purpose. Several new actors, including labour intermediaries and specialized hosts, have begun to influence labour migration processes in the region and how dehumanization narratives and processes evolve.

## 4 | RESEARCH METHODS

The research is based on in-depth interviews conducted in Sopron and its immediate surroundings in 2018 and 2019. Key actors were identified to account for the different discourses of various actors in the labour migration channel and the labour process (McCullum et al., 2013). These actors included workers, recruitment representatives, managers, other labour market intermediaries, worker hostel managers, and local community leaders. Snowballing helped secure further interview partners, but the method did not efficiently identify interview partners because hosts/owners and gatekeepers rarely allowed discussions in hostels, company managers had aversions, and workers were reserved about sharing information.

Twenty-six interviews were conducted altogether (Appendix A). Eleven semi-structured interviews involved workers (living in worker hostels and other accommodations) and five with hosts, whereas four further interviews addressed intermediaries (four interviews), employers, or HR managers (three interviews). Three public servants at the local municipality were also interviewed to juxtapose insights gained on the field with official discourses of the migration process. Interviews are not representative in the statistical sense. Nevertheless, the research design allowed us to obtain multiple perspectives of how workers and other actors perceive labour migration and to provide a detailed comprehensive picture of dehumanization discourses around labour. The interview material also allowed us to identify the most significant social boundary-making dimensions.

During the interviews, workers answered questions about their livelihoods as migrant labourers. Company and intermediary representatives and accommodation hosts shared views about migrant workers. The topic of dehumanization was not initially conceived as the analytical focus of the broader research but emerged during the interviews, with interviewees often raising the issue.

Anonymity ensured a confidential interview environment. The sensitivity of the issue and earning trust entailed that conversations usually did not involve voice recordings or sensitive data collection. Interviews were in Hungarian, the native language of both the interviewer and interviewees. Language differences did not skew the

analysis. Talks were typed in situ or written in note form. The personal observations of the interviewer supplemented the coded interview material.

## 5 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the subsequent analysis, we follow migrant workers from their homeland to their current workplaces and temporary homes in the Sopron area. Following the first research question, we were interested in how various actors perceive migrant labour as nonhuman. We examine what the frame “nonhuman” means to whom and whether self-dehumanization (Ruttan & Lucas, 2018) and hybrid or relational forms of dehumanization (Hovorka, 2018) are present. Dehumanization involves individuals acting to deny humanness to other human beings (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015). The interview material allowed for a systematic analysis of the metaphors various labour migration actors use. To answer the second research question, we compared dehumanization at the geographical sites of both production and reproduction to gain new insights into migrant labour dehumanization. Table 1 summarizes the main dimensions of the analysis and the main results.

### 5.1 | Homeland and recruitment

Migrant life begins with departure from the homeland. Larger firms in West Hungary recruit through local newspapers and Facebook advertisements in “backward” regions of Hungary and neighbouring countries. Recruiters scour rural areas in the hope of finding a labour force. Some recruiters are employed by labour market intermediaries that gained importance during previous economic booms in Eastern Europe (Coe et al., 2008), whereas others are independent, self-made men (*Intermediary 1*).

Dehumanization at this site manifests as objectifying people as a labour force (Ruttan & Lucas, 2018; Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015). Only the number of workers is crucial during the sourcing process; their subjectivities and human nature are obliterated (cf. Stojanov et al., 2021). For intermediaries, contacts with potential workers lead to dehumanizing individuals through objectification and exploitation (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2017).

*Intermediary 1* and *Employer 1* provided detailed insights about their jobs, including the dark sides of recruitment. For example, faked documents about Hungarian ancestors helped ethnically non-Hungarian workers through the simplified naturalization process and allowed them to enter the labour market with fewer administrative burdens (see also Tátrai et al., 2017). Moreover, the Hungarian government supports recruiting non-Hungarian workers from neighbouring countries and beyond. In our case, the recruitment process does not feature recruitment fees, illegal migration, or bonded labour, but gangmasters receive commissions based on how many people they recruit. The organized, assembled nature of the process is thus clear, and workers might be forced to accept precarious jobs in the Sopron area labour market (*Intermediary 1 and 2*).

**TABLE 1** The sites of migrant worker dehumanization in the Sopron area.

Sites	Subject of dehumanization	Nonhuman metaphors	Connotations	Relationality	Presence of self-dehumanization
Homeland	Labour force (human capital); partially: age and gender	Hunting (potential workers as prey)	Neutral or negative	Comparison of the homeland with the regions of work	Not prevailing
Recruitment	Labour force ("human material"); ethnicity	Migratory bird	Neutral or negative	Comparison with regular workers	Not prevailing
Workplace	Ethnicity; nationality; gender	Draft animal; bloodsucker	Both negative and positive	Segmentation of migrant workers according to their homeland; comparison of nonmigrant workers with migrant workers; employer–employee relations	Self-dehumanization: loss of memories and place-identity
Worker hostels	People; age; gender	Living like animals; already animalized; bloodsucker	Negative	Comparison with conventional ("normal") livelihoods; comparison of hosts and migrant workers	Not prevailing
Sopron	Migration; ethnicity	Dangerous	Negative	Comparison of Roma and non-Roma	Mutual dehumanization: locals as bloodsuckers

Source: Authors' compilation.

Contrary to most literature on migrant worker dehumanization, the human aspect of the migrant labour force remains apparent in the case of small enterprises and brigades. As Ciupijus et al. (2020) reported in similar cases, the "snowballing" method to collect contacts entails mobilizing private informal networks to recruit workers and bring their friends and relatives. Such informal human ties remain important during migrant life in the Sopron area (*Employer 1, Intermediary 2, Worker 1 and 2*).

A common dehumanization metaphor in recruitment is the barrenness of labour source regions, framed by either emphasizing the lack of workers in sourcing areas or dehumanizing the people left in the sourcing region. *Employer 1*, who works in the construction sector, emphasized the former aspect in the following passage:

*And they began to bring the people. First came Transylvania, but it ran out, I also had Hungarians from Transylvania. But they do not stop here anymore, they go further [to Western Europe]. But now in my workers' area, Ukraine, we are running out of people. (Employer 1)*

Therefore, from a relational perspective, a "flood" in target areas of migration (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018; O'Brien, 2009, 38) results in a "drought" in sourcing areas. Some interlocutors, such as *Intermediary 3*, who runs a recruitment company, argued that there are still "reserves" in the countryside and the neighbouring countries, but many people do not want to work. This perception about reserves is fuelled by the fact that large groups of Ukrainian migrant workers arrived in Sopron before the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale war in Ukraine.

Stigmatizing regions lacking people appropriate for work, is a recurring narrative among employers, intermediaries, and employees when comparing the characteristics of the labour market of West Hungary with those from sending regions. As *Intermediary 4* implied after he emerged from a black BMW sports car, workers are considered a scarce resource that needs to be found. *Intermediary 1* claimed that "only the defective human material remained" in some areas, necessitating specific local recruiting knowledge to find the "appropriate" people for work. Age and gender generally define appropriateness. *Intermediary 1* reported that men above 50 or 60 are broadly ineligible for labour migration. This public understanding is a parallel version of regional development policy discourses about "backward" or left-behind regions without a sufficient labour pool, which sometimes stigmatize regions and their inhabitants as undeserving of development based on their relation to work (Haubner et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023). As our empirical material shows, this understanding is based on perceptions about one segment of the working-age population that might be mobilized as workers.

Recruited people need to be transferred, tested for work, and trained. Migrant workers often experience dehumanization during these iterations. From the perspective of HR managers, the high fluctuation and substantial drop-out rate of migrant workers at these workplaces drive the perception of non-humanness. *Intermediaries 1, 4, and Host 1* complained that five to ten times more people are needed to reach the desired employee number targets. *Intermediary 3* added that fluctuation rates grow as the distances from homelands increase. In these cases, implicit comparisons to local core workers are made without considering the niches various workers fill.

The bus trip from the homeland to West Hungary plays a decisive role in the social construction of dehumanization. On the one hand, such transportation decreases the agency of “portable” potential workers. On the other hand, bus transport might also elevate workers to the higher social and human status of tourists. This is a new finding in our empirical material, not emphasized by previous literature on migrant labour dehumanization. As *Intermediary 1*, human resource managers at companies (*Employer 2*), and accommodation hosts explained (*Host 2*), residents of source regions use organized bus transport for travelling and sightseeing. *Host 2* claimed that this service is only available to ethnic Hungarians and not to non-Hungarian migrant workers. In this case, boundary-making occurs according to nationality and ethnicity. Some migrant workers utilize the noteworthy (counter)strategy of intentionally failing the recruitment test at the factory, travelling back home, attending another tour later, and visiting another company in another town.

The circular migration of people to the Sopron area is reflected in animal metaphors that locals apply to migrant workers. *Host 1*, who owns an average detached house, reported that he has had 500 tenants in the past 2 years because “*there are many migratory birds, which ensures fluctuation is strong.*” In this quotation, *Employer 2*, an HR manager at a large firm, used a romantic metaphor to describe fluctuation. He generally attempted to make a positive impression on the interviewer by explaining how he has sought to help workers but that they often leave regardless because they lack the competence to remain at a workplace. The migratory bird metaphor represents worker fluctuation and the practice of using Hungarian firms as springboards to obtain higher-paying jobs in Austria (Kiss et al., 2020). Seasonal job opportunities in Austrian agriculture, particularly in viticulture, lead to seasonal fluctuation in Hungarian factories, further strengthening the “migratory species” analogy: People return to manufacturing firms in winter and ask to return, as employees and intermediaries both reported (*Intermediary 1 and 3, Employer 2*). Returning to the literature review findings, animal metaphors used for human behaviour have several positive or negative connotations, but dehumanization metaphors are used to make meaning of labour migration.

## 5.2 | Workplace

Working condition discrepancies cause differing dehumanization discourses and practices. Here, we focus on our first research question, that is, how and which actors perceive migrant labour as nonhuman in the production process.

Dehumanization is a crucial means to tell apart “regular” (nonmigrant) and migrant workers, often resulting in harsher treatment of the latter (Econie & Dougherty, 2019; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016). The distinction appears in the overexploitation of migrant workers. For example, in agricultural work, intermediaries may earn more than half of the wage paid by the Austrian winegrower in informal arrangements (*Intermediary 2*).

*Worker 2, 4, Intermediary 3, and Employer 3* report that locals are more willing to accept migrant workers if they do “good” work.

However, dehumanization also pairs with hard work and the perceived animal/nonhuman nature of migrant people, which is associated with undereducation and originating from “backward” regions or countries. In factories, representation often connects to the monotonous work migrant workers do along the assembly line. As *Employer 2* reported:

*A generation that comes from such a deep poverty that they are animals themselves. [...] They are so under-educated and come with such things which should be very basic for an adult. What kind of questions they have! They are terrifyingly weak mentally. They can only assemble two parts or not even that. We tried, but some could not be taught at all.*

Dehumanization contributes to a significant proportion of workers quitting before the end of probation periods. In such cases, a clash between inhumane working conditions and the bodily human nature of the workers, manifested in homesickness, explains their decision to return home. This aspect was prevalent in manufacturing worker interviews:

*Many leave this place, mostly out of homesickness. [...] Many cannot stand it. One week, and they go back. Many think they come, and money grows on trees. But working in three shifts tries men, too. (Worker 3)*

From the perspective of employers, humiliating migrant workers through actions such as boasting about “*firing three hundred people this year*” is also a factor (reported by *Intermediary 2*).

The exploitative nature of the work done by migrants entails dehumanization surfacing when workers characterize employers. Previous literature has often neglected this aspect (Bernardino-Costa, 2014; Valtorta et al., 2019). Migrant factory workers frequently refer to employers as “bloodsuckers” (Musloff, 2015) to describe exploitative employment and working conditions (*Host 2, Worker 4*).

*There are bloodsuckers in every factory, believe me. I draw the essence from the whole thing, they tell you everything to sugarcoat the issue. (Worker 4)*

Apart from the simple distinction between migrant and non-migrant workers, social boundary-making is also based on nationality, gender, and ethnicity. Workers, intermediaries, and employers tend to mobilize stereotypes to explain differences between regular local Hungarian workers and migrants to establish foreignness (Andrijasevic et al., 2019).

*Eastern Hungarians come here, work for eight hours during the week, and have second jobs at the weekend. [...] Our ethnic Hungarians from abroad are not hard-working. Women cannot go cleaning after eight hours'*

*work, they are dead. [...] They are not a strong nation.*  
(Host 2)

Worker 4 confirmed this statement: “Ukrainians and Romanians are many times more persistent than our Hungarians from Serbia.”

Regarding dehumanization and animalization along gender lines, men dominated physically demanding jobs such as vineyard work, whereas few women worked in these sectors.

*In the beginning, we had only men. Then, some of them brought their draft animal-like women. So, there is a need for physique and attitude. (Intermediary 2)*

The ethnicity aspect appeared in describing the dehumanized nature of work, based on differentiating Roma and non-Roma employees. Several interviewees claimed that the desire to return home early afflicts many Roma workers. A Roma porter at a worker hostel explained that “Roma people are mainly like that, coming here, working for a month, and going back. I am also Roma, but this is the truth” (Host 3). This finding aligns with current research on the role of the Roma population in the Hungarian labour market as an industrial reserve army (Ková, 2019; Rajaram, 2018).

The empirical material also observed a special kind of self-dehumanization, self-objectification, or anti-personification at the workplace (cf. Kouakou, 2017; Ruttan & Lucas, 2018; Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015) involving a coping strategy used by the vast majority of the several thousand migrant workers circulating among companies in the Sopron area. “When you leave, you cannot think about home. When you start thinking, you hop the stick and go home.” The source of this quotation was Worker 4, an ethnic Hungarian from Serbia who managed to build a reputation and attain a higher position at the firm. Such cases correspond with the findings of Ruttan and Lucas (2018), whose research participants prioritized wage-earning and attributed less humanness to themselves.

In sum, the Hungarian context with specific ethnic geographies (ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries), labour migration patterns (relatively free movement of labour across national borders), and the history of Eastern European nationalisms warrants that dehumanization research in labour processes extends beyond understandings focused on ethnicity and gender from the postcolonial and biopolitical foci of other research contexts (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016).

### 5.3 | Spaces of social reproduction

After their shifts, workers return to their accommodations, which range from smaller or larger worker hostels offering different levels of comfort (number of beds in a room, rooms with/without bathrooms, etc.). Following the same characterology previously described, nonhuman characteristics are used most often to symbolize the basic living conditions of migrant workers. According to these descriptions, low-skilled workers are only interested in money for “booze and cigs”, are

“financial illiterates” (they may even have financial problems the week after being paid), and unable to manage their lives in general (wordings by *Intermediary 1, 2, 4; Employer 2, 3*). These descriptions featured alcohol, drug, and anger issues in worker accommodations and occasional conflicts over women. An evaluation by an employer illustrates this viewpoint and the underlying dehumanizing assumption:

*What do they do in the hostel? [...] They burned the bedstead and the cupboard in the backyard. They are animals at this level, and primitive. (Employer 2)*

Driscoll (2005) and Francis (2019) argue that the precarization of young workers often accompanies dehumanization in their social reproduction. What Driscoll (2005) observes in the Japanese service sector context is also applicable in the West Hungarian case in agricultural and manufacturing work. The very spaces of worker hostels challenge workers and hosts as subjectivities because of possible conflicts. An employer vividly explained how young male workers far away from home need to learn how to reproduce themselves as humans:

*Eight people came here, eight men. [...] Listen, they work 10 hours, they are glad to sit down, they do not have time for cleaning up. Now, that there are two women among them, the situation has consolidated. They just cleaned for two days. Not to mention you have to learn to cook, as a young kid. You learn to cook here. [...] An 18-year-old kid comes here, travels 500 kilometers, he should eat something, you cannot always have only bread and fatback. (Employer 1)*

Gender division of labour was also apparent in another hostel situated in Sopron's upper-class neighbourhood, where the host behaves like a virago to maintain order but has also fought for worker rights. She has helped with shopping, cooking, and washing; arranged paperwork for ethnic Hungarians from abroad, and has tried to control how firms treat their employees. She even terminated work contracts when problems arose. She has also defined and enforced strict rules in the hostel. In this instance, dehumanization has been used as a positive metaphor, parallel to what Jaramillo's (2012) case study found in the case of Mexican women depicting themselves as donkeys. In the Hungarian case, a woman describing herself as an animal cares for and orders the lives of (male) migrant workers. Employers here, in the same passage, are again depicted as bloodsuckers (cf. Musolff, 2015).

*The point is that I do not tolerate trespassing. During acclimatization, I impart to everyone that this is a community, where working and a desire to live counts. That is the reason why we do not have conflicts, I arrange everything with my »battle-pig-like« attitude. [...] I do not work with intermediaries who do not treat their workers well. [...] [Factory name] sucks the blood of the workers at such a high level, I do not even understand why the*

*Roma from Békéscsaba [a city in Southern Hungary—authors' remark] do not bash them. [Factory name] is the same. They cannot room here. (Host 2)*

We found no evidence of self-dehumanization of workers at social reproduction sites, explicable by the fact that migrant workers possess stronger agency than their acquaintances and family members who did not leave home. And even if migrant workers have needed some degree of self-dehumanization during work to cope with long shifts and monotonous labour (i.e., to forget about their humanness), their accommodation might have meant an ephemeral retreat from these inhumane conditions.

In sum, related to our second research question on differences between dehumanization in the sites of production and reproduction, we generally found similar patterns. This finding is consistent with research on exploitation processes in the production and reproduction spheres (Mezzadri, 2019): under current capitalist relations, employers, and intermediaries extend control to spaces of reproduction, such as worker hostels. These relations are, however, slightly different in the West Hungarian migrant worker context, as some actors managing worker lives aim to “humanize” migrant worker habits and environments instead of dehumanizing them.

## 5.4 | The city of sopron

Boundary-making between social groups within the city of Sopron also involves the dehumanization of migrant workers. The increasing number of migrant workers has led to an increase in the number of interactions with locals. How locals perceive and experience the process varies. Intermediaries and employers, often catalysts in the process, reflected on these changes and the ambiguities that local social changes have led to. However, the local government did not thematize the arrival and challenges of migrant workers publicly.

Ethnicity is a predominant form of boundary-making. Most migrants are labelled as Roma people and often have denigrating, nonhuman characteristics applied to them—irrespective of whether they are members of the Roma community or not. In a survey, Kiss et al. (2020) found that locals experience an increasing number of Roma people in the city, which underlines the rising importance of this type of boundary-making. As an intermediary claimed:

*Sopron has now too many Roma people. I am absolutely not happy about this process. Roads are congested, kids cannot be let out alone to the street. (Intermediary 4)*

Or as an employer put it:

*The town is overcrowded. Those who came from the East fill the space of those who left for Austria. And the latter people complain about the whole situation. This is a Catch-22. (Employer 3)*

Migrant workers themselves also thematized conflicts with Sopron locals in the interviews. Acceptance and racism are the two endpoints of the scale, and both were found in the interview material, similar to incentives and barriers of assimilation. For example, *Worker 3* experienced that locals look at non-locals strangely in everyday interactions; another worker reported that many racist people inhabit the city (*Worker 5*). *Host 2* concluded that Soproners view themselves as more valuable than newcomers and are, therefore, exclusionary in everyday practices. Explicit dehumanization, however, is rarely present in these narratives.

*The problem is that here, in this neighborhood, people live in a different life function. Women see in no time that someone is poor, and they do not even consider them anymore. Everyone is friendly, but your look matters a lot. (Worker 3)*

The bloodsucker metaphor turned up once again in an interview, as our interviewee described the “indigenous”—newcomer relationship, that is, how long-time Sopron residents capitalize on immigration and profiteer on demand for accommodation. A mutual dehumanization/animalization occurs within this narrative:

*Look. Soproners are all stupid, but they have high self-esteem. It is almost Austria; milk is more expensive here in Tesco than in Budapest. They do not work; they suck the blood of the incoming people. [...] The black economy is proliferating here. The pits of all pits are rented to the newcomers. (Host 2)*

In sum, the geographical location of Sopron was crucial to how the dehumanization of migrant workers happens, underlining the importance of a geographical analysis. Local nonmigrant residents are also vital actors in forming dehumanization narratives, even if they are not directly involved in the production or social reproduction of migrant workers.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Our empirical case study around Sopron, West Hungary, explored the interrelations of previous research on labour migration and dehumanization. Combining the two research strands allowed us to interpret complex labour migration patterns—locals commuting to Austria, locals offering services partly for Austrian customers, a relatively saturated local labour market, and a large inflow of migrant labourers—as intermingled with complex patterns of dehumanization.

The first research question of the paper was how various actors in the labour process perceive migrant labour as nonhuman. We argued that considering the multiple voices of many actors in discourses about migrant workers is essential. Geographers in the past decades have made efforts to amplify the voices of migrant workers, which were often unheard or even silenced. Our research interviews revealed different dehumanization discourses of/by the different actors in the labour process, resulting in a nuanced analysis of migrant worker dehumanization.

In the Hungarian case, ethnicity, nationality, and gender are particularly significant in the social boundary-making of migrant labour concerning dehumanization. The main difference from previously analysed postcolonial and settler colonial contexts (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010; Mitchell, 1996) is the prevalence of the ethnicity/nationality divide, that is, differentiating between ethnic Hungarians living abroad and non-Hungarians of other nationalities. The Roma/non-Roma difference also dominated labour dehumanization, corresponding with previous empirical literature about Hungary (Kovai, 2019; Rajaram, 2018). Therefore, the research unveiled more detailed and diverse dehumanization narratives in labour migration processes, as previous research suggested from other geographical contexts.

Previous literature has referred to the parallel existence of nonhuman metaphors both in the negative and the positive sense—such as in individual coping strategies. Our study found that migrant workers engage in self-dehumanization as a counterstrategy. Although most of the literature has focused on how workers are animalized (see, e.g., Vezovnik, 2012), our study concluded that both employees and employers/hosts are depicted as bloodsuckers or other pernicious nonhuman actors. This finding also warrants that social realities often go beyond dehumanization as merely denying humanness (Volpato & Andrighetto, 2015).

The second research question asked how considering both the sites of production and reproduction might further a theoretical understanding of migrant labour dehumanization.

The case study revealed that dehumanization was more noticeable during the recruitment process—both when recruiters enlist people to work and when migrant workers are hired—than actual wage work. This finding extends previous geographical research on worker exploitation in low-skilled job segments, emphasizing the objectification and alienation of human labourers during the process of “becoming abstract labour” (Büscher, 2022; Marx, 1990; Strauss, 2012). Worker segmentation also occurred, evidenced by how various actors dehumanized different groups of workers. In line with research on labour market intermediaries (Coe et al., 2008), our study found that intermediaries were crucial in formulating and circulating dehumanization discourses.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by further illuminating how dehumanization at the workplace “doubles” in spheres of social reproduction, such as in migrant worker accommodations (Meszmann & Fedjuk, 2018; Mezzadri, 2019; Mitchell, 1996). Worker hostels are sources of both dehumanization and humanization of workers, generally based on the gender division of labour. Workplaces and temporary homes are directly interconnected, as employers or labour intermediaries often organize accommodations for workers, contrasting the capitalist conventions of maintaining separation between the home and workplace. This apparent contradiction requires further research on dehumanization processes at worker accommodations, particularly for workers in low-skilled jobs, which might be comparable to what we found in our case study on migrant workers.

The processes and discourses in this paper offer a snapshot of a time when there was a prevailing labour shortage in low-skilled segments of agriculture and manufacturing in West Hungary. However, *Employer3* envisaged a transformative effect of a crisis,

even before the pandemic: “*I do not believe that this [labor migration] will ever end. Perhaps an economic crisis or if something breaks down in Austria.*” Both the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 and the full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022 have significantly reshaped migrant workers' livelihoods in Sopron and its surrounding region. These changing circumstances may also have transformed dehumanization discourses related to migrant workers. Labour migration patterns of recent years and their interrelation with dehumanization processes warrant further scholarly attention.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## APPENDIX A

See Table A1.

**TABLE A1** Basic data of the interviewees.

Group	Age	Gender	Origin	Type of employment	Venue of the interview
Employer	60–70	Male	Local	Entrepreneur, construction industry	Construction site
Employer	40–50	Male	Local	Manager, light industry	Via telephone
Employer	30–40	Male	Local	HR manager, automotive industry	University
Host	40–50	Male	Local	Guesthouse owner	Guesthouse
Host	40–50	Male	North Hungary (Roma)	Caretaker	Worker hostel
Host	40–50	Male	Local	Guesthouse owner	Guesthouse
Host	50–60	Female	Local	Guesthouse manager	Guesthouse
Host	30–40	Male	North Hungary (Roma)	Hostel manager	Worker hostel
Intermediary	40–50	Male	Local	Entrepreneur	Coffee shop
Intermediary	50–60	Male	Local	Entrepreneur	Coffee shop
Intermediary	30–40	Female	Local	Administrator	University
Intermediary	50–60	Male	Local	Manager, entrepreneur	Company office
Public servant	40–50	Male	Local	Public servant	Via telephone
Public servant	40–50	Male	Local	Public servant	Office
Public servant	50–60	Female	Local	Public servant	Via telephone
Worker	50–60	Male	East Hungary	Automotive industry	Guesthouse
Worker	50–60	Male	East Hungary (Roma)	Automotive industry	Guesthouse
Worker	20–30	Male	East Hungary	Automotive industry	Guesthouse
Worker	30–40	Male	North Hungary (Roma)	Viniculture, Austria	Worker hostel
Worker	40–50	Male	North Hungary	Construction industry	Worker hostel
Worker	40–50	Male	North Hungary	Light industry	Worker hostel
Worker	40–50	Male	Ukraine (Ethnic Hungarian)	Construction industry	Construction site
Worker	20–30	Male	Ukraine (Ethnic Hungarian)	Construction industry	Construction site
Worker	40–50	Female	South Hungary	Light industry	Guesthouse
Worker	30–40	Male	North Hungary	Construction industry	Guesthouse
Worker	30–40	Male	Serbia (Ethnic Hungarian)	Light industry	Guesthouse