

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



The discourse and practices of Polish migration policy during the COVID-19 pandemic – economisation as a form of emergency governance

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Abstract

The existing literature points to securitisation as a dominant form of emergency governance emerging in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, also in relation to migration. However, another important way of framing migration during the pandemic is in terms of economisation. This article aims to analyse the rationale underpinning Polish immigration policy during COVID-19 with a focus on different forms of economisation: macro-economisation, which prioritises economic growth over other socially important issues; and substantive economisation, which centres the needs of a population during a given historical moment. Based on desk and qualitative research, including analysis of official documents and media coverage as well as in-depth expert interviews, we argue that the logics of both kinds of economisation can be discerned in Poland's immigration policy. Our overall conclusion is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite strong anti-immigrant rhetoric in official political discourse, Poland's immigration policy prioritised the interests of the national economy and labour market over strategies of security and social control.

Keywords: Migration, COVID-19, Securitisation, Economisation, Essential workers, Poland

Introduction

The literature on emergency governance in general and migration governance during the COVID-19 pandemic in particular has been growing rapidly. Yet, as Arias Cubas et al. (2022) have noted, both the impact of COVID-19 on societies and the impact of the pandemic on the way in which migration is conceptualised remain far from clear. Among a diversity of research approaches, two main strands of literature on models of emergency governance can be distinguished: scholarship examining the securitisation efforts of governments worldwide in response to the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Fraundorfer & Winn, 2021; Tesche, 2021); and literature showing how COVID-19 has been tackled according to the logic of neoliberal economics and wealth accumulation (Bacevic & McGoey, 2021; Livne, 2021). As far as immigration policies are concerned,

direct references to the economisation of migration during COVID-19 remain scarce. Yet a logic of economisation can be tracked in the expanding literature on key workers in particular and policies towards labour migration more generally (Méda, 2022; Achtnich, 2022; Anderson et al., 2021).

Both at the global pan-national (see the prominent role of the European Union (EU)) and national levels, governments and pan-national regimes appealed to notions of securitisation to justify the introduction of emergency measures limiting various individual rights, including the right to free movement. Governments tended to construct COVID-19 as a fundamental security issue, declaring themselves 'at war' and arguing that the pandemic could only be tackled through the suspension of 'normal' politics. Another key characteristic of the response to COVID-19 was the primacy of national-level solutions. Numerous studies have analysed the securitisation discourse that swiftly took hold and which was used to justify border closures and mobility restrictions at a national level (Fraundorfer & Winn, 2021; Kirk & McDonald, 2021; McAuliffe et al., 2021; Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021). Analysing the nexus between security and migration in respect of COVID-19, scholars have emphasized the way in which such restrictions disproportionately affected migrant populations. As a rule, governments prioritised the free movement of citizens, with migrants frequently excluded; there were numerous cases in which migrants were left stranded in destination, home or transit countries (Koinova et al., 2023; Triandafyllidou, 2021). The way in which such restrictions on free movement were framed and implemented at the EU level entrenched unequal access to mobility and protection (Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2021). The spread of the pandemic also saw the increased deployment of social-control and surveillance practices in respect of migrants (Koinova et al., 2023).

Studies emphasising the logic of economisation—understood as the framing of anti-COVID-19 policies around the issues of market rules and wealth accumulation—suggest that after the initial securitisation phase many countries began to deploy neoliberal logics with the aim of ensuring economic profit and political legitimacy (Bacevic & McGoe, 2021). In his seminal work on the economisation of COVID-19, Livne (2021) stresses that this phenomenon can take different forms, the most prevalent being macro-economisation: that is, policies that have as their overarching goal the maximisation of economic growth. Nevertheless, other modes of economisation were also deployed, including more static forms aimed at the 'defence' of national populations. The substantive form of economisation acquired special significance during the pandemic in light of the re-nationalisation of social life and the weakening of globalisation. An existing tendency towards the institutionalisation of regimes of governance geared towards meeting societies' 'essential' needs was intensified. Although studies on the 'essential workers' are not usually examined through the prism of substantive economisation, some common patterns can nonetheless be traced. The widespread adoption by states of the concept of the 'essential worker', with migrant workers frequently framed as vital to efforts to sustain national economies during the pandemic (Reid et al., 2020; Okiror, 2020; Gaitens et al., 2021; Fiałkowska & Matuszczyk, 2020) can, at least to a certain extent, also be explained by the logic of substantive economisation.

This article aims to present a case study as a way of taking a closer look at the complex relationship between the securitisation and economisation of migration in Poland

during a global pandemic. Poland was chosen due to its apparently strictly securitised migration policies, which are to a large extent governed by the logic of economisation in the shape of both macro-economisation and substantive economisation. Our analysis suggests that after an initial period of securitisation (and despite the continued closure of the country's borders) securitisation ceased to be the principal logic of governance in a pandemic context. Instead, various steps were taken to facilitate the arrival and stay of migrants; this was part of an economic approach that tended to view the presence of migrants as conducive to mitigating the pandemic's negative effects on both national GDP and the labour market. At the same time, both logics remained in a dialectical relationship: border closures and the securitisation of certain groups of migrants paved the way for increased openness towards the employment of non-nationals.

The article is structured as follows: the first part outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework of our study and includes an analysis of the relationship between securitisation and economisation in the context of migration. We also examine whether the concept of the 'essential workers' can be viewed as part of the logic of economisation. In the second part, we present Poland as a case study of a country which, heavily securitised borders and restricted "unwanted" migration, has nonetheless become a new migrant destination state with an economy increasingly dependent on foreign workers undertaking seasonal, unskilled and semiskilled work as well as working in sectors and professions, such as healthcare, that require substantial professional training. Poland's profile in this respect was consolidated during COVID-19, leading to the liberalisation of residence and employment regulations for migrants living in the country during the pandemic.

Securitisation versus economisation in the context of COVID-19 emergency governance

The theoretical point of departure of this article are studies researching the economisation of governance in times of pandemic on the one hand, and the ones seeing migration's securitisation and economisation as dialectically entrenched governance mode on the other. The article contends that an emergency, understood as an exceptional situation of significant risk or harm (Sorell, 2013:1), usually entails swift and sudden political decision-making adopted on the fast track and having a more executive than legislative character (Honig, 2009). Thus, emergency politics often takes a form of securitisation, understood as the framing of a given issue as a fundamental threat to security requiring the introduction of special measures that would be deemed unacceptable in other circumstances (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitisation is a dispersed, iterative, and interactive process as well as a set of interrelated practices and discourses (Balzacq, 2011: xiii). Yet the focus of such emergency measures may also be upon maintaining "old" social and governance practices despite the changing context, or upon making only minor adjustments. This can be best traced through the case of economic governance that tends to diffuse economic framing to different aspects of social and political life within a modern neoliberal state (Laruffa, 2022). In this article, we draw on Horvath's understanding of economisation as an approach to governance that seeks to view as many issues as possible through an economic lens on the basis that such issues are "believed to follow and should therefore be governed according to market principles" (Horvath, 2014: 158).

Above all, this article builds on the seminal work of Livne (2021) who distinguishes two modes of economisation and traces their operation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Livne also describes a third, neoclassical mode of economisation that will not be examined here as it is less relevant to the case of migration). Livne argues, building on the work of Foucault (2007) and Mitchell (2002), that the predominant mode of economisation during the pandemic was macro-economisation, defined as “making the pursuit of bettering, growing, and optimising the economy [...] the main economic problem at stake” (Livne, 2021: 24). In a COVID-19 context, Livne argues, economic performance—rather than, say, a trade-off between economic goals and public health outcomes—became the barometer for how well a country was coping with COVID-19. Such logic is particularly relevant to the study of migration policy in a context in which the pandemic tended to be viewed rather as a hindrance to economic activity than as a significant social phenomenon in its own right. A second, more statist and socially-oriented substantive approach was also in evidence during the pandemic. Livne describes substantive economisation as the logic of putting subsistence and the satisfaction of the material needs of a society at the centre of a state’s policymaking, thereby applying the opposite logic to that applied by neoclassical economists. The second key trait of substantive economisation is its situatedness within a specific time and context and its embeddedness within the empirical confines of each specific case study.

The second strand of scholarship built upon in this article considers migration as the subject of both securitisation and economisation. This literature has made two main contributions. Firstly, and as formulated by Amelina (2021), such approach is embedded in the ‘doing migration’ turn in migration studies, which focus on the examination of historical, political and economic contexts through which certain individuals start to be socially produced as ‘migrants’. In particular, this approach emphasises the embeddedness of specific categorical differentiations in organisational and institutional routines. The second argument that this article builds on is that of Horvath (2014), who underlines the complex relationship between the securitisation and economisation of migration. In the past, scholarship tended to view the economisation of migration as opposed to its securitisation (Buonfino, 2004). However, as Horvath argues (2014: 157), attention to the interplay between the securitisation and economisation of migration is indispensable because “both of these rationalities are structurally anchored in the liberal nation-state”. This interplay can be explained by looking at the way in which the modern neoliberal state is underpinned by the logic of utilitarianism. Some groups of migrants are perceived through the prism of economisation and such migrants’ legal and social positions are shored up by the skills they possess. By contrast, where certain groups of migrants are viewed through the lens of securitisation, it is their race/ethnicity or cultural difference that are to the fore (Amelina & Horvath, 2020). Where migrants come from neighbouring countries, historical trauma and collective memory may be at the root of securitisation (Jaroszewicz & Grzyski, 2021). In the context of the spread of COVID-19, the logic of securitisation may have been strengthened by essentialising and generalising narratives about certain ethnic groups regarded as more likely to transmit the virus. According to Pacciardi (2023) from the beginning of pandemic, the mobility of the

travellers from global South was seen as more problematic and potentially more dangerous than that of passengers from global North, based on gendered and racialised understanding of the threat. In sum, states 'construct' different categories of migrants through a combination of economisation and securitisation in line with an overarching logic of utilitarianism.

The prevailing logic of substantive economisation and indistinct links between economisation- and securitisation-based approaches to governance are reflected in the phenomenon of the 'essential workers'. The lockdowns imposed to save lives during COVID-19 prompted public authorities to identify those workers, many of whom were foreign, whose work was viewed as indispensable to maintaining the basic functioning of social infrastructure (Blau et al., 2021). As can be gleaned from an analysis of the various guidelines and legislative measures introduced in different political contexts across the EU during COVID-19, workers in certain sectors tended to be classed as 'essential workers'. These included healthcare workers as well as those working across food-production and agriculture, public utilities and safety, manufacturing transportation and communications (Gaitens et al., 2021). A European Commission (EC) document entitled 'Guidelines concerning the exercise of the free movement by workers during the COVID-19 outbreak' lists a number of essential occupations including medical personnel, security workers, food-processing workers and transport workers (European Commission, 2020). This article argues that the definition of certain workers as 'key' or 'essential' is inherently linked to the logic of substantive economisation and paradoxes relating to the economisation/securitisation of migration. Being 'essential' means in practice that that a certain kind of labour is indispensable in terms of making other members of society feel secure and safe; yet the frequently 'frontline' character of such 'essential' jobs can imply diminished security for those who perform them (Fiałkowska et al., 2022; Fiałkowska & Matuszczyk, 2021).

The research is based on qualitative research (content analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs)). A main source of data was sixteen interviews conducted in Poland between May 2022 and March 2023 with officials, NGO representatives, researchers and practitioners in the fields of migration, public health, economics and public security (Annex 1). The main selection criteria were informants' involvement in activities linked to emergency governance during the COVID-19 pandemic, their expertise on the topics relevant to the study, and their awareness of discourse and practices impacting Poland's migration policy. Interviews were conducted in Polish. The quotations used in this paper have been translated into English by the authors. This data was complemented by content analysis of legal and media sources relating to the topic of migration management in Poland during the pandemic and published between March 2020 and November 2021.

Empirical research

Poland as a new immigration country

The article refrains from discussion of the economic model adopted by Poland after the dissolution of the Eastern bloc and how that model has evolved over the years. Yet it is important to stress that the Polish version of neoliberalism, built quickly out of the ruins of socialism, was strongly market-oriented and offered very limited welfare provision to

those parts of the population who failed to adapt smoothly to the new economic circumstances (Nowicka-Franczak, 2021). The result was that both Polish society and newly-arrived migrants have encountered issues including low wages, long working hours and minimal social protection; this was particularly true at the beginning of the transformation process. Moreover, the logic of macro-economisation, hegemonic in the period after 1989, not only aimed at 'speeding up' economic growth but also at 'catching up' to the West (Nowicka-Franczak, 2021); this necessitated an even more rigid mode of economisation than was being applied in Western Europe.

These seismic shifts in geopolitics and Poland's domestic political system also resulted in the creation from a scratch of a modern migration policy. Over the decade that followed 1989, Poland joined the EU (2004) and then the Schengen area (2007). The progress of European integration also changed the political and economic functions of Poland's borders, which included both internal (Schengen-area) EU borders and external borders (i.e. borders with non-EU states) (Sobczak-Szelc et al., 2022: 20–40).

In the years that followed Poland became increasingly dependent on migrant labour, especially in a climate of increasing depopulation and demographic ageing. Polish immigration policy has become increasingly liberal, particularly towards migrant workers from former Soviet countries; it has also sanctioned both circular migration and (to a certain degree) work in the shadow economy. An influx of migrant workers under the so-called 'simplified procedure for employing foreign nationals' (Górny et al., 2018) caused a rapid change in the migration profile of Poland, which had hitherto been gradually evolving from a typical emigration country to an emigration-immigration one (Górny et al., 2010; Okólski & Wach, 2020; Strzelecki & Pachocka, 2020). The predominant migrant group in Poland in this period were Ukrainian citizens, most of them men who came to take up short-term employment (Górny et al. 2018). In 2016 Poland recorded a positive migration balance for the first time since the early 1990s, further strengthening its trend towards becoming a new immigration country (Okólski, 2021). Unprecedented events relating to the full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, preceded by the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and the start of armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, significantly accelerated this transformation.

After the conservative Law and Justice party won parliamentary elections in 2015, Poland began to be perceived as a country that was reluctant to accept forced migrants, particularly those from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region or those seen as coming from the Muslim or Arab world. This perception was strengthened by anti-refugee and anti-Muslim political and media pronouncements by representatives of the ruling party. Additionally, during the period 2015–2017, the Polish government failed to implement the pan-European mechanism for the temporary relocation of asylum seekers from Greece and Italy (Górak-Sosnowska & Pachocka, 2019; Mołęda-Zdziech et al., 2021). Moreover, since mid-2021, Poland has been experiencing a humanitarian crisis on its border with Belarus resulting from the opening of the irregular border crossing channel by the Belarusian authorities.

Poland has not had an official migration strategy since 2017, when a document Polish Migration Policy: Current State of Play and Proposed Actions, which had been adopted by the Council of Ministers in 2012, was annulled. The small number of

migration-related official documents upon which policy appears to be based includes several now-revoked draft migration documents (2017), a policy document assessing the state of play with migration in Poland's (2020) and a number of draft policy documents that were made public (2019 and 2021) but never formally approved. These documents emphasise Poland's demographic and economic interests and the importance of legal channels of economic migration. Accordingly, the sole national-level policy document currently in force is the Strategy for Responsible Development by 2020 (with a perspective until 2030), published in 2017, in which migration policy is framed with an emphasis on the need to promote economic migration in order to "complement shortages in labour resources in some sectors (e.g. the so-called care sectors, construction, medicine)"; and, in the long term, to counteract depopulation, demographic ageing and diminishing labour-market resources (Rada Ministrów, 2017: 12–13, 169–171).

Securitisation as an initial emergency governance response and as a stand-by logic

Poland was among the first EU countries to enforce lockdowns, the closure of borders and the introduction of mobility-related emergency measures (Pancevski & Hinshaw, 2020). Poland's first COVID-19 case was detected on 4 March 2020; the first lockdown restrictions were imposed ten days later. The official announcement of a "state of epidemic" in Poland was made on 20 March. Soon afterwards, the government limited gatherings to a maximum of two people (excepting families, religious gatherings and workplaces), restricting free movement in all but essential situations. This was the strictest mobility restriction in the history of Poland according to a Stringency Index published by the University of Oxford University¹. Yet from a legal standpoint Poland did not introduce any of the emergency measures provided for in the national constitution. Instead it combined a new law on COVID-19 with amendments to an act on infectious diseases, announcing a "state of epidemic-threat" that later became a "state of epidemic". This legal strategy of bypassing the constitution not only resulted in the adoption of chaotic anti-COVID legislation on a large scale, but also led to severe infringements of fundamental human rights (Drinoczi & Bień-Kacała, 2022). It set in train, moreover, one of the characteristic patterns of the emergency politics the favouring of fast-track executive decision-making not subject to standard parliamentary scrutiny or public discussion (Honig, 2009). Specific to the case of Poland, however, was a tendency to quickly give up on a securitisation approach or to adapt it to the changing political and economic context, with the result that securitisation became something of a stand-by rationality (used, for instance, to limit the right to claim asylum).

Alongside limits placed on internal mobility, the government also decided to restrict cross-border mobility and, with certain exceptions, to restrict the access of foreign citizens to Poland. International passenger air and rail travel was suspended and a fourteen-day period of home quarantine was imposed on those entering Poland (exceptions were made for people living in Poland but commuting on a daily basis to neighbouring countries and for drivers of wheeled transport). Finally, the right to claim asylum was

¹ This indicator is elaborated on the basis of thirteen policy response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, travel bans, testing policy, contact tracing, face coverings, and vaccine policy, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (Mathieu et al., 2020).

restricted (Klaus, 2021). As a result, in 2020, the movement of people across Poland's borders with Belarus, Russia and Ukraine (i.e. the EU's external border) decreased by 67% (Straż Graniczna, 2021). As one migration scholar interviewed for this study noted: "In my view, COVID has further strengthened this super-orthodox approach to migration, i.e. the idea of immigration as a source of danger" (EXP_MIGR_2).

The border closures compounded the differentiation of migrants on the basis of their nationality, with EU and European Economic Area (EEA) nationals tending to be favoured. As a migration scholar we interviewed for our research explained:

"The wife of a Swiss citizen who had never been to Poland and who crossed the Belarusian-Polish or Ukrainian-Polish border...As far as immigration is concerned she had more rights than me, someone has been living in Poland for over ten years [but] who only has a Polish permanent residency card" (EXP_MIGR_2).

Not all non-Schengen borders were re-opened simultaneously, moreover. Poland's borders with Ukraine, the nation of origin of the majority of the country's labour migrants, were reopened in February 2022, but its borders with Belarus and Russia were not (Straż Graniczna, 2022). Furthermore, the rights of asylum seekers were also severely restricted in practice. Although border officials maintained that asylum seekers could seek entry to Poland "based on a provision that allows people to be admitted 'in particularly justified cases' and after obtaining permission from the Commander-in-Chief of the Border Guard" (Klaus, 2021), in reality asylum seekers were able to enter Poland only in much smaller numbers than before. All of the above illustrates the phenomenon of coexistence of "spaces of solidarity" and "spaces of exception", as theorised by Triandafyllidou in relation to migrants' belonging (Triandafyllidou, 2021).

The closure of Poland's borders posed serious problems for the Polish economy, with the hiring of foreign workers disrupted until 2021. As a representative of the public labour administration told us: "After 4 March [2020] and until at least June there were visible reductions in employment, in issuing employment declarations, or in work permits. Slight declines were recorded in all of these areas, but the rebound in 2021 was very noticeable" (EXP_MIGR_6). The panicked exodus of thousands of Ukrainian citizens who returned home during the pandemic also exerted a particularly strong impact on the labour market (Jaroszewicz, 2020). Border closures were not only a problem when it came to hiring workers. The quarantine measures also caused serious issues in the labour market, including the construction sector, due to the fact that, as one migration expert we interviewed noted, "[those who worked] on construction sites [...] did not work at the[ir] employer's place [;] this meant that if someone [new] arrived, they would be locked up in some workers' hotel in a barrack for a week or two" (EXP_MIGR_8).

As the majority of the experts we interviewed noted, the securitisation of COVID-19 in Poland led to some categories of workers being perceived as a threat to public health. This could be exemplified by the case of care workers and domestic workers; no scare-mongering speeches were made about these groups by political actors, but those who would ordinarily have employed care workers or domestic workers nonetheless felt endangered by the prospect of hiring them. As two of the experts we interviewed—an immigration lawyer and a trade unionist—explained, families who hired babysitters or

cleaners became the object of suspicion because of concerns about the virus being transmitted (EXP_MIGR_9; EXP_MIGR_7).

As a result, care workers were one of the groups that suffered the most in terms of pandemic-related loss of employment. However, the results of our public discourse analysis do not suggest that this group was subject to securitisation by politicians. It seems, rather, that such migrant workers (and, of course, not all care workers were migrants) were perceived negatively by families who might otherwise hire them because of the peripatetic nature of their work; in the context of a generalised securitisation of human mobility, this was a significant source of fear.

Macro-economisation

Macro-economisation reifies the economy as the main object of social life, viewing it as an all-encompassing organisational apparatus that needs to remain uninterruptedly open across all sectors, rather than being subject to the specifically tailored and narrower instruments of economic policy (Livne, 2021). Macro-economisation thus aims at directing different spheres of social life, such as migration management and the fight against COVID-19, towards the overarching goal of optimising economic growth.

A specific form of economisation that does not seek to introduce specific solutions aimed at meeting the needs of the population but rather pursues the overarching agenda just outlined, macro-economisation was already the dominant approach in immigration policy in Poland by spring 2020, when COVID-19 began to peak. At the beginning of the pandemic, foreign nationals whose permission to be in Poland was due to expire during the state of epidemic emergency had their residence permits extended. This made it significantly easier for some groups of labour migrants to remain legally in Poland during the lockdowns. Later, in November 2021, when pandemic-related restrictions had become much more lenient, the Polish parliament almost unanimously passed a bill making it easier for foreign nationals living in Poland to be granted temporary residence and work permits. This piece of legislation waived the requirement for foreign nationals to have a settled place of residence, expanded the range of circumstances in which temporary residence and work permits did not have to be reissued and accelerated procedures for issuing temporary residence and work permits to foreign nationals intending to work for “entities of particular strategic importance for the Polish economy” (Sejm, 2021: passim).

The substantiation of this legislation was largely in accordance with the macro-economisation logic of economic utilitarianism. The act explicitly states that it aimed to “improve [...] certain legal procedures concerning foreign nationals’ access to the Polish labour market in the interest of Polish employers and facilitate the recruitment of foreign employees by strategic investors” (Sejm, 2021: 1). As such, the text of the legislation instantiates an economic logic understood in terms of labour market development and the streamlining of bureaucratic processes. This is explicitly cited in the text: “The intention of the project promoter was to streamline bureaucratic processes [and] shorten the length of time it takes to process the abovementioned cases” (ibidem). Poland was not exceptional in applying such logic. Other EU member states also introduced liberal legal solutions with the aim of keeping labour migrants in their labour markets during

COVID-19 (Sommarribas & Nienaber, 2021). Still, what was unusual in the Polish case was the extent of the liberalization measures adopted; among other outcomes, they resulted in a steady increase in the presence of foreign workers in Poland despite the pandemic (Kaczmarczyk, 2023).

Buonfino (2004) contends that overall problematisation of migration as primarily an economic issue has been fostered by business interests. A similar process can be observed in the case of Poland. Macro-economisation has been chiefly driven by the strong influence of employers in need of workers, who have effectively lobbied for new regulations to allow migrants to enter and easily Poland and legalise their stay and work more easily. During the pandemic, employers were involved in lobbying for the partial re-opening of borders and the organisation of special flights that allowed labour migrants to return to Poland. In general, the interests of employers were a crucial factor in shaping immigration policies, especially during a period of emergency in which employees, trade unions and others were insufficiently well organised. One immigration and legal scholar we interviewed emphasised “the strength of the economy and the lobbying efforts of employers that lie behind various changes to the immigration regime” (EXP_MIGR_5). Another expert specialising in immigration noted that the pandemic did not change the situation much because, when it comes to migration, decision-makers “listen very keenly to [the views of] big business [...] and employment agencies”, leading to a gradual liberalisation of migrants workers’ access to Polish labour market (EXP_MIGR_2). A public administration employee interviewed for our research summarised Poland’s migration policy as follows: “It is also an interesting situation that the labour market in Poland is regulated to some extent by business [...] There are no limits here anymore [...] It is possible to employ foreigners from Uzbekistan, from the Philippines or from anywhere in the world” (EXP_MIGR_6).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an existing tendency of certain sectors to rely on foreign labour. Immigration and economic policy experts interviewed for our research stressed that foreign labour has been crucial to sectors including construction, transportation, the restaurant trade, industry, agriculture, and care. The pandemic, however, made some sectors even more dependent on foreign labour than before. As one migration scholar who participated in our study pointed out, COVID-19 strengthened Poles’ perception of certain sectors as unattractive. This perception combined with the strength of demand for labour in these sectors meant that such work has often ended up being performed by migrants (EXP_MIGR_3). As a result, and as an employee of the Office for Foreigners noted, migrants were still able to come to work in Poland even amid pandemic-related restrictions (EXP_MIGR_14). Moreover, as a labour market expert explained, anti-pandemic measures led to an increased need for new workers to fill the gaps created by existing personnel being forced to quarantine (EXP_MIGR_11).

Economisation was thus a prevalent logic not only in respect of migration but also when it came to broader state governance during different stages of pandemic. This was particularly in moments when mass gatherings, including demonstrations, were still forbidden and other individual rights limited. As one of the experts we interviewed stated: “You can’t demonstrate about something politically, but [...] it’s OK for you to work in a place where there are five hundred employees, where people get sick

and no one cares, because the main thing of simply, well, making money, because the economy can't take a hit" (EXP_MIGR_4). Other experts emphasised that economic logic became the dominant force in driving political decision making once the initial securitisation phase had passed.

Substantive economisation: agriculture workers and medical personnel

Although macro-economisation, however, emerged as the principal logic governing migration policy during COVID-19, it is also possible to discern elements of substantive economisation, understood as a policy logic aimed at satisfying a society's most fundamental needs (Livne, 2021) as well as the operation of the concept of the 'essential workers.' Poland's immigration rules do not foreground this formulation, yet there were several categories of migrants who might have been regarded as essential. The following section presents case studies around substantive economisation in relation to foreign workers in two sectors: agriculture and medical services.

During COVID-19, substantive economisation, as a mode of economics that prioritises supplying society with essential resources, was mainly visible in respect of agriculture and food production. Issues relating to a shortage of foreign workers and possible material shortages were most evident in agriculture, as in the "first migrantised sector of employment in Poland" (Fiałkowska et al., 2022: 14). As one migration expert admitted, "after all, they [farmers] are always shorthanded and the pandemic did not help here" (EXP_4). The return migration of Ukrainians and the slower pace with which they were replaced by new arrivals led to dramatic appeals by local food producers, who "[faced] the prospect of their crops [rotting] in the field" (Fiałkowska & Matuszczyk, 2020: 5). Another study, based on interviews with food producers in the Sandomierz region of south-eastern Poland, shows the extent of the problem caused by a decrease in the number of seasonal workers arriving from abroad (Karaczun et al., 2022). As countries in Western Europe began to facilitate the migration of seasonal workers to fulfil the needs of their agriculture sectors, the problems faced by Polish farms became even more acute, with many domestic Polish workers leaving for work abroad (Fiałkowska & Matuszczyk, 2020). As our interviewees pointed out, "the [main] factor that led to the easing of various restrictions [was] pressure from farmers that there would be no one to pick strawberries" (EXP_MIGR_9). At the same time, it was still much easier to hire workers from abroad in the agriculture sector than in other sectors. As a political scientist noted, agriculture was probably the only industry in which seasonal workers from Ukraine could commence work immediately on the day of their arrival. Such employees worked on the territory of the private farms owned by their employers and therefore benefited from less stringent restrictions on their mobility (i.e. they could move freely on the territory of their workplaces) (EXP_MIGR_8).

Yet substantive economisation is not always fairer or more effective than classical economisation. There is no evidence that a shortage of foreign labour would significantly endanger the food security of Poland or even the financial security of individual farmers leading to bankruptcy (Kalinowski & Wyduba, 2020; Karaczun et al., 2022). As an interviewee engaged in research into the agricultural sector explained, lobbying by fruit growers and fruit producers' groups had a significant impact on how emergency governance was conducted in relation to labour migration (EXP_MIGR_8).

As another interviewee, a migration scholar, summarised the situation: “This is very interesting because employers in the field of agriculture always get their way and they always get special treatment, special employment conditions and so on” (EXP_MIGR_4). Workers, by contrast, had no power to influence state policies in favour of their interests because there are no advocacy groups representing seasonal workers in Poland’s domestic agricultural sector (EXP_MIGR_8). The case of the farmers’ lobby and seasonal workers in agriculture offers a prime example of the substantive economisation of migration during COVID-19. Yet questions remain as to whether the special treatment received by the sector reflected the genuine needs of the population as a whole.

Another example of economisation (and one that somewhat contrasts with the above) can be discerned in the case of medical services. It was the government that first took steps to make it easier to hire foreign workers in this sector, with the aim of meeting the growing health needs of a population faced with COVID-19. It faced strong opposition, however, from Polish doctors, who declared these measures to be contrary to the interests of patients. The Polish medical association, the Chamber of Physicians and Dentists, invoked security concerns in voicing their opposition to the government’s proposals. Interestingly, the Polish authorities responded with economic arguments. Discussion about easing the rules for employing foreign medical staff had begun before the outbreak of the pandemic. However, the COVID-19 crisis provided an additional reason to make it simpler to employ foreign medical workers.

A 2020 proposal by the Minister of Health put forward that a foreigner with a diploma in medicine or dentistry should be allowed to work in Poland for a maximum period of five years without being obliged to have their qualifications officially validated or pass equivalent Polish examinations (Sejm, 2020: 2). The lower chamber of the parliament, the Sejm, passed a bill along these liberalising lines, but it was amended in the upper chamber, the Senate, which was controlled by the political opposition, after criticism from medical bodies. The Chamber of Physicians and Dentists, for example, put forward the view that hiring medical staff from abroad was “completely unjustified [from] the point of view of the safety of Polish patients” (Naczelna Izba Lekarska, 2020: 2). Nevertheless, the government continued to abide by a logic of economisation, with the final text of the bill claiming that “for a long time employers have been reporting shortages of specialist doctors in various fields of medicine” (Sejm, 2020:2).

In the end, the law was not approved and the liberalisation measures proposed had to be introduced by ministerial decree, a development that supports the idea of a link between substantive economisation and the politics of emergency. On 20 November 2020, the Minister of Development, Labour and Technology passed legislation amending the rules around the employment of foreign citizens without a work permit (Minister of Development, Labor and Technology, 2020). These regulations relate principally to medical staff such as doctors, nurses and paramedics. This did not, however, put an end to the argument between the government and the Chamber of Physicians and Dentists, which introduced its own internal regulations amending the Polish-language proficiency criteria for persons applying for the right to practise as a doctor or dentist in Poland. The government challenged these rules in

the administrative court, which ultimately repealed them (Gazeta Wyborcza, 2021). This case shows how question around 'essential workers' could become the object of political debate in cases where the government's understanding of the material needs of the population did not coincide with the views of the medical establishment.

Interplay between securitisation and economisation

The empirical data examined for this study suggests that Poland's immigration policy during COVID-19 was strongly shaped by the logic of economisation, despite the prominence of securitisation discourses in relation to both border controls and asylum practices. Summing up key trends in Poland's immigration policy during COVID-19, one interviewee from the trade-union movement noted that the coexistence of nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric with a liberalising immigration regime was a "well-established paradox" (EXP_MIGR_7). This trend was not new and continued after the end of the pandemic. It was confirmed by, among others, an NGO employee, who commented that the assistance provided at the very end of the pandemic to Ukrainians fleeing the war and its reflection in public discourse also instantiated the convergence of securitising and economising approaches to migration (EXP_MIGR_1).

Our analysis supports Horvath's conclusion that economisation and securitisation stand in a dialectical relation to one another in the context of the utilitarian migration policies of the modern neoliberal state, with their precise interplay dependent on wider political-economic and social transformation processes (Horvath, 2014). The case of Poland during COVID-19 shows that in the context of a politics of emergency governments have more scope to deploy the rationality of sovereign power in order to e.g. close borders or limit access to their territories. Thus, during the pandemic, state institutions felt less constrained in liberalizing labour-migration rules. This latter category of migrant—labour migrants—were allowed to enter Poland and settle in the country in cases where they could show that they were helping to "save" the national economy. At the same time, migrants who did not fit this profile were either rendered invisible or securitised. As a result, labour migrants, and particularly those involved in meeting the material needs of Polish society, were subject to a liberalized legal regime, albeit one that often placed them at increased risk of infection with COVID-19. An economic expert interviewed for our research noted that the pandemic led to the introduction of policies which made it considerably easier for migrants to settle in Poland in the long term (EXP_MIGR_10). At the same time, and as NGO employees pointed out, migrants were severely impacted by the lockdown in the restaurant and hotel trade, with those who managed to keep their jobs often being forced to go to work while sick (EXP_MIGR_13; EXP_MIGR_16). We can therefore conclude that the interplay between securitisation and economisation during COVID-19 not only resulted in an increase in re-bordering practices, but also led to the opening up of cleavages between discourses and practices relating to 'othered' and unwanted migrants on one hand and legally resident ones on the other.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a paradigm shift in global and national governance processes. Instead, as much recently published scholarship demonstrates, it tended to replicate or amplify existing trends. As Tazzioli and Stierl (2021) argue, that “the pandemic has further multiplied unequal access to mobility, rights, and protection” when it comes to migration processes within the EU. Livne (2021), on the other hand, contends that the weakness of decentralized and privatized governmental systems combined with the significant and enduring impact of neoliberal governance patterns meant that economisation became the main logic governing states’ responses to COVID-19. This article has added to these discussions, supplementing existing research into migration with a study of economisation and the interplay between economisation and securitisation in Polish immigration policy during COVID-19.

In the Polish case, securitisation functioned as a stand-by governance rationality during the first phase of the pandemic, impacting migration policy through e.g. border closures and quarantine measures. The strictest feature of securitisation was the closure of borders, which made it significantly more difficult for asylum seekers and migrants who were not part of labour-migration schemes to enter Poland. Labour shortages triggered by the closure of the borders and panic return-migration on the part of many labour migrants tended not to be framed in terms of security but were rather presented as economic issues. The general trend towards macro-economisation as the defining state approach to immigration was driven by the lobbying of employers, who succeeded in convincing the government to liberalise its immigration regime for labour migrants. Poland engaged in substantive economisation to a limited extent, hiring migrant workers for work in agriculture and attempting to liberalise the process for hiring foreign medical personnel. It is the conclusion of this article that even an emergency characterised by a high degree of securitisation—such as the pandemic—did not succeed in changing, and perhaps even compounded, existing ways of ‘doing migration’, with economic factors including the relatively strong influence of employers over immigration policy continuing to condition Poland’s relative openness to temporary labour migration.

Annex 1

List of interviews

- 1.EXP_MIGR_1 NGO employee and journalist – 23.05.2022 – online
- 2.EXP_MIGR_2 migration researcher – 27.05.2022 – online
- 3.EXP_MIGR_3 migration researcher – 08.06.2022 – Warsaw
- 4.EXP_MIGR_4 migration researcher – 09.06.2022 – online
- 5.EXP_MIGR_5 lawyer, criminologist and migration researcher – 20.07.2022 – Warsaw
- 6.EXP_MIGR_6 Ministry of Family and Social Policy employee – 29.11.2022 – Warsaw
- 7.EXP_MIGR_7 migration researcher and trade-unionist – 01.12.2022 – online
- 8.EXP_MIGR_8 political scientist and migration researcher – 02.12.2022 – online
- 9.EXP_MIGR_9 migration scholar and lawyer – 06.12.2022 – online
- 10.EXP_MIGR_10 economic expert specialised in migration – 06.07.2022 – online
- 11.EXP_MIGR_11 labour-market and expert– 08.07.2022 – online

- 12.EXP_MIGR_12 political scientist and migration researcher – 26.05.2022 – online
 13.EXP_MIGR_13 NGO employee – 10.08.2022 – Warsaw
 14.EXP_MIGR_14 Office for Foreign Nationals employee – 17.06.2022 – online
 15.EXP_MIGR_15 financial analyst with expertise in migration – 15.03.2023 – online
 16.EXP_MIGR_16 migration scholar and NGO employee – 13.07.2022 – online

Authors' information

Not applicable.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Marta Jaroszewicz, Mateusz Krępa and Marta Pachocka. The first draft of the manuscript was written by all authors who commented on parts of the manuscript written by other authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

The research is financed by the National Science Centre, Poland, within the project *Mobility, migration and the COVID-19 epidemic: governing emergencies in Lithuania and Poland*, grant number 2020/38/L/HS5/00155 in the DAINA2 funding scheme.

Availability of data and materials

Data analysed in the article are available from the corresponding author on a reasonable request.

The research obtained approval by the appropriate ethics committee at the Centre of Migration Research at University of Warsaw. All interviews were carried out upon informed consent of their participants.

Declarations**Competing interests**

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Received: 18 May 2023 Accepted: 4 June 2024

Published online: 17 June 2024

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