

Tackling, encouraging or ignoring? The outmigration of transnational domestic care workers on the political agenda in Poland¹

¿Abordar, fomentar o ignorar? La emigración de los trabajadores domésticos transnacionales en la agenda política de Polonia

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Although the topic of attracting EU mobile workers to transnational care sectors has received considerable attention, the perspective of sending countries, particularly with regard to policies concerning the departure of care workers, has not yet been analysed empirically or theoretically. This article aims to address this gap by tracing the agenda-setting process regarding the temporary outmigration of workers from Poland to the care sector abroad between 2004 and 2019. Drawing on qualitative empirical material in the form of 60 expert interviews, the article is framed by Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams model. The analysis confirmed that the mobility of Polish workers in the home care sector was not on the political agenda prior to the pandemic. Key stakeholders in addressing this phenomenon as both an opportunity and a challenge, and in proposing administrative solutions, are care agencies that send workers, and associations representing the interests of the care industry in Poland.



Abstract

Aunque se ha prestado mucha atención al tema de atraer a trabajadores móviles de la UE a los sectores transnacionales de cuidados, no se ha analizado ni empírica ni teóricamente la perspectiva de los países de origen en lo que respecta a las políticas relativas a la salida de los trabajadores de este sector. El presente artículo pretende abordar esta laguna mediante el seguimiento del proceso de establecimiento de la agenda en relación con la emigración temporal de trabajadores polacos al sector de los cuidados en el extranjero entre 2004 y 2019. Basándose en material empírico cualitativo en forma de 60 entrevistas a expertos, el artículo se enmarca en el modelo de corrientes múltiples de Kingdon (1995). El análisis confirmó que la movilidad de los trabajadores polacos en el sector de la asistencia domiciliar no figuraba en la agenda política antes de

¹ **Data Access Statement:** The data analyzed in this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality restrictions and internal regulations on property rights.

la pandemia. Las principales partes interesadas a la hora de abordar este fenómeno como una oportunidad y un reto, y de proponer soluciones administrativas son las agencias de cuidados que envían trabajadores y las asociaciones que representan los intereses del sector asistencial en Polonia.

transnational care work; emigration; Poland; intra-EU mobility; intermediaries; agenda-setting; migration policy and politics

trabajo transnacional en el sector asistencial; emigración; Polonia; movilidad intracomunitaria; intermediaries; establecimiento de agendas; política migratoria y política



Key words

Received: 25/06/2025. Accepted: 16/09/2025



Dates

1. Introduction

The European Care Strategy (2022) suggests that one solution to tackle acute care deficit in EU Member States could be legal labour immigration. However, with accelerated depopulation and an ageing population, fierce competition for mobile care workers between countries is intensifying. Although the Strategy refers to the employment of migrants from third countries, the elderly care system in many EU countries is based on the transnational mobility of workers, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe (Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2024; Chau, 2020; Uhde, 2025). This is facilitated by an intra-EU mobility regime based on the free movement of workers and services, as well as by persistent differences in the quality of employment or wage dispersion between receiving and sending countries (Shire, 2020; Lillie et al., 2025). The intensification of private intermediaries activities leading to the establishment of a care industry in Europe is also significant (Nowicka et al., 2021). Additionally, a plethora of studies demonstrate the precarious situation of EU mobile carers (Neumann & Hunger, 2016; Di Torella & Masselot, 2021), poor and illicit employment arrangements in the home care sphere (Lutz 2011; European Economic and Social Committee 2016) or the non-compliance practices of unscrupulous intermediaries and unfair employers (Leiber, Matuszczyk & Rossow, 2019; Marchetti, Geymonat & Di Bartolomeo, 2022; Uhde, 2025).

The question, however, is to what extent EU-sending countries address the problems of this particularly vulnerable group of mobile workers and of demand-driven transnational labour mobility? What role do non-state actors play in setting the political agenda around care workers mobility? Recent studies on migration policy and agenda-setting provide limited answers to this inquiry (Weinar, 2018; Kyriazi et al., 2023; Bruzelius, 2025). As part of the so-called 'emigration turn' in migration policy and politics, researchers focus on the relationship between the sending state and its citizens and their descendants (Skeldon, 2021), on supporting remittances (Pedroza & Palop-Garcia, 2025), or protecting mobile citizens from disadvantages (Lafleur & Yener-Roderburg, 2022). Against this background, empirical studies on the responses of EU countries to the mobility of their own citizens remain scarce (Careja, 2013; Blauburger et al., 2023; Roos et al., 2025). As a result, a knowledge gap remains regarding the complex process behind policy agenda-setting in countries covered by the free movement of workers and services (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2023; Bruzelius, 2025).

While the COVID-19 pandemic and the adoption of the European Care Strategy marked a strategic shift in the politicisation of mobile care workers in Europe (especially their treatment as essential/key workers), the pre-crisis context remains poorly understood. By politicisation I mean the process whereby a given issue or institution becomes the subject of ideological political disputes that become visible in the media, and which is underpinned by aspects such as subjectivity over objectivity, introduction of controversy or partisan associations (see Duszczuk et al., 2019). To fill this gap, the purpose of the article is to trace the process of agenda-setting between 2004 and 2019 in the domain of temporary outmigration of workers from Poland to the care sector abroad. Despite facing severe demographic changes and a worsening care deficit, Poland remains the leading country (in absolute numbers) of origin for mobile care workers in the European Union in this period (Kocher, 2024). Inspired by the strand of research on the state-organised export of domestic care workers (Rodríguez, 2010; Parreñas, 2021) and nurses (Yeates, 2009; Walton-Roberts et al., 2025) as well as the transnational migrant labour market (Shire, 2020), I aim to clarify the extent to which the outmigration of temporary workers has so far been the subject of political discourse and domain of political economy in Poland. I argue that, despite the dynamic growth of the presence of Polish workers in the transnational care labour market and the negative phenomena associated with it, policymakers and politicians in Poland have not addressed (neither problem or opportunity) and engaged actively in this issue before COVID-19 outbreak. In this regard, in line with the ongoing processes of commercialisation and marketisation of European elder home care (Di Torella & Masselot, 2021), the initiative is taken by profit-oriented actors in the care industry who pursue their interests and solutions. Drawing on qualitative empirical material, I attempt to answer the question posed in the article's title regarding the state's approach to mobility of care workers. In order to capture this complexity and multidimensionality, I have employed Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams model, which allows us to depict the process of agenda setting and the role of different interest groups, both political and non-political.

This paper makes an original contribution to the emerging debate on the political dimensions of worker emigration (Careja, 2013; Lee, 2017; Weinar, 2018; Bruzelius, 2025; Walton-Roberts et al. 2025). Theoretically, it enriches studies on the politicisation of the free movement of workers and services, especially with regard to low-skilled workers' mobility into labour-intensive immigrant niches (e.g. agriculture, construction, platform economy; see Danaj & Meszmann, 2024). Contrary to the prevalent trend of examining the politics of emigration (Delano, 2009; Skeldon, 2021), the article introduces a novel approach to exploring the intricate process of temporary migration. Empirically, the findings highlight the under-recognised role of Poland (and the wider CEE region) in transnational care system, as well as the involvement of care industry stakeholders in the political economy of outmobility.

2. Literature review: labour outmigration on the political agenda

The theoretical starting points in this article is an „emigration turn” in migration policy and politics, which initially included non-European countries (Shire, 2020; Pedroza & Palop-Garcia, 2025). Since the 2000s, there has been a notable shift in researchers' interest in analysing state responses or interventions to emigration (Xiang, 2003; Delano, 2009; Roos et al., 2025; Walton-Roberts et al., 2025). Thus, previous conceptual discussions on the political dimension of emigration can be analysed according to the category of political problem, the degree

of politicisation and the available political solutions. It is also crucial to take into account the main stakeholders, divided into state and non-state policy actors.

The meaning attributed to the emigration of citizens is highly contextual and strongly influenced by the multidimensional socio-economic situation of given country. State actors of Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Vietnam, India or Sri Lanka, struggling with high levels of unemployment, underemployment or economic downturn, have seen the departure of citizens as a way immediate solution to these severe problems and general to stimulate country investment (Yeates, 2009; Henderson, 2022). Similarly in other countries, these measures were intended to increase foreign exchange reserves (Pyle, 2006) or boost the country's economic development (Ireland, 2018). Surprisingly, return migration is not always welcomed in emigration countries such as Ukraine, where concerns are expressed about the re-emigration of 'failed migrants' (Malynovska, 2020). A similar framework prevailed in the CEE countries after 2004, when the extension of the free movement of workers to citizens was seen by politicians as a breakthrough opportunity and facilitated access to new labour markets (Careja, 2013; Blauberger et al., 2023). Moreover, facilitating the departure of (skilled) migrant suggests treating emigration as a kind of investment in human capital, as Xiang (2003) writes in the context of Chinese policy. It is worth noting that non-state actors, including civil society, churches organisation, also influence how diasporas are perceived or its impact analysed (Jaroszewicz & Kaźmierkiewicz, 2014). The main advocates and promoters of intensive emigration, both temporary and permanent, have remained, the actors that make up the migration industry, who have turned every departure into a lucrative business (Elias, 2013; Chau, 2020; Matuszczyk & Bojarczuk, 2024).

One strand of research on the impact of mass labour emigration from CEE countries suggests that a few years after the intensification of outmobility, it begins to be perceived by different actors (e.g. politicians, local governments, NGOs) as a disadvantages or costs. For example, the brain drain and unfair competition in the EU single market have become perceived negatively in the sending country few years after eastward enlargement (Roos et al. 2025). Consequently, that meant employers in that region urgently needed to readapt to the new circumstances and challenges for labour-intensive sectors (Reegard & Dębowski, 2020). What is more, the severity of out-migration, mainly of young and well-educated residents (Weinar, 2018), has also been highlighted by peripheral municipalities and those facing shrinkage (Bryer et al., 2024). Noticeably, grassroots organisations of EU mobile workers become responsible for problematising emigration, especially the negative phenomena in hosting country that migrants face (Rogalewski, 2018). Against the backdrop of the growing popularity of posting workers within the European Union, national labour inspectorates in host and sending countries have strengthened their position and are cooperating more closely (Lillie et al., 2025).

Increasingly, economic emigration can be politicised to different degrees and at different times (Delano, 2009; Skeldon, 2021). To illustrate it, in Philippines there has been a consensus among policymakers to create a state-led brokerage system in which expatriates are portrayed as 'national heroes' (Parreñas, 2021) since 1970s. Recently, the political activism around the regulation of emigration and its consequences can be observed in the foreign policy framework between many sending and receiving states (see Mexican-US case, Delano, 2009). Having said that, political engagement of diasporas to influencing the agenda of the host country is also strongly embedded (Weinar, 2018). Regardless of the geographical context, in many countries a shift can be observed from political elites ignoring emigration to gradually addressing the phenomena surrounding departure as part of the broader policy agenda (Careja, 2013;

Lee, 2017; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2023). Roos et al. (2025) argue that governments in the countries with the highest emigration rates (e.g. Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania) have managed to put this issue on the EU agenda several years after the onset of mass intra-EU mobility. Thus, the politicisation of the issue is exemplified by the numerous arguments in favour of 'balanced mobility' and the initiatives pushed in the EU forum to introduce fees for the migrant-receiving state to compensate for its less developed regions (Roos et al., 2025; Bruzelius, 2025). Right-wing and centre-right parties, in particular, may on the one hand publicly encourage the re-emigration of citizens in order to counteract the disintegration of families in the country of origin (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2023), while on the other hand they may propose solutions that would lead to restrictions on the departure of selected categories of would-be migrants (Duszczuk et al., 2019).

An emerging strand of research reveals a trend whereby countries that benefit economically from the mobility of their own citizens recognise the need to create mechanisms to protect the interests of these workers abroad (Pedroza & Palop-Garcia, 2025; Walton-Roberts et al., 2025). The predominant approach is to create special institutions with a centrally managed infrastructure to accompany their own citizens (Rodriguez, 2010). In order to adequately prepare them to function in the transnational space, public-private partnerships offer prospective migrants (voluntary or mandatory) access to vocational training, orientation courses, language schools or legal education during the pre-departure phase in order to strengthen their defences against exploitation (Henderson, 2022). As part of policy interventions, individual countries can introduce exit incentives (such as loans for low-skilled workers) to counteract debt bondage in brokered labour migration (Rodriguez, 2010). This approach can be ambiguous in that it can be about upskilling workers to compete in global markets, but it can also have a preventive effect. Lafleur and Yener-Roderburg (2022) propose the concept of the transnationalisation of welfare regimes in the context of the growing concern of sending countries for the welfare of mobile workers and the use of new mechanisms to provide access to basic social services (e.g. health care). Another important area of action in the field of emigration policy is the use of migration diplomacy and foreign policy (Lenard, 2022). Interestingly, private labour market intermediaries also put forward their own proposals for instruments to regulate the institutional environment for intra-EU mobility (e.g. the idea of certifying legally operating companies, see Leiber et al., 2019; Danaj & Meszmann 2024).

In summary, no coherent theory has yet been developed to explain a country's approach to economic emigration. Recently, however, there has been a growing interest in migration studies in seeking explanations for the politicisation of emigration and related issues. While empirical studies on the export of care workers from Asian countries dominate this area of research, a theoretical understanding of the agenda-setting process for transnational labour mobility in EU Member States is still needed.

3. Study context: outmigration of care workers from Poland

Following the collapse of the communist system in Poland, new channels for legal labour emigration opened up. As early as the beginning of the 1990s, a surge in workers going abroad was observed, primarily due to structural problems in the labour market (Lutz, 2011). As in other countries of emigration, circular (or even shuttle) migration has become a labour market coping strategy for vulnerable and precarious workers. This pattern of labour migration was further consolidated after 2004, when Poland's accession to the European Union creat-

ed new employment opportunities in other EU countries. Poles quickly became the biggest beneficiaries of the free movement of workers and services (Lillie et al., 2025). Within two decades, approximately 2.5 million people, mainly of working age, had left Poland permanently (Duszczyk, 2021). In subsequent years, Poles have become the second most numerous group of EU-movers after Romanians (10-12% of the total). Consequently, the influx of Polish workers has become an example of the 'Euroboomerangs' (Weinar, 2018, p. 45).

For over 30 years, Polish workers could be found in most European Union countries (including Spain and Italy), primarily in low-wage, non-unionised sectors such as domestic work, construction, and agriculture (Chau, 2020). While the scale of the Polish presence in different countries has fluctuated since 1990, Germany has historically remained the most significant destination. Following the complete opening of the German labour market in May 2011, interest from Poland in various forms of economic activity in Germany has increased (Duszczyk, 2021). This influx is mainly due to geographical proximity, economic relations and long-standing traditions of labour migration, as well as the facilitations provided by the German government, such as the bilateral agreement on the mobility of seasonal workers signed in 1990. Germany's openness to workers from its eastern neighbour is also fostered by the positive reputation Polish workers have developed over the years (Lutz, 2011). Furthermore, the transport infrastructure between the two countries enables travel back and forth in a short time (Neumann & Hunger, 2016). Consequently, Polish migrants constitute the largest group of foreign workers in the German labour market (439,000 in 2022).

A striking feature of the large-scale emigration from Poland from the 1990s onwards was the commercialisation of this movement and the proliferation of private labour market intermediaries (Lutz, 2011; Matuszczyk, Salamońska & Brzozowska, 2021). Although opportunities for outbound mobility from Poland increased after 2004, a significant proportion of outward migrants still opted to use intermediary services. Initially, these placements were mainly informal, carried out by individuals with migration experience, such as middlemen or migration brokers, who developed networks of contacts with employers in host countries (Palenga-Möllenberg, 2024). Over time, however, their activities became more institutionalised and professionalised (Leiber et al., 2019).

Sending agencies and other actors in the migration industry have specialised in placing care workers, establishing Poland as the European leader in supplying domestic workers (Kocher, 2024). However, the ease of entering this sector and the existence of multiple mobility regimes between these countries make monitoring and controlling this phenomenon extremely difficult (Neumann & Hunger, 2016). It is estimated that over 300,000 Polish workers are employed in Germany's home care sector. This figure is much higher than the total number of migrant care workers in Austria, the Netherlands or Switzerland (Chau, 2020). Paradoxically, however, the 190 care agencies operating in Poland account for only 10% of the volume of workers legally sent to Germany (Palenga-Möllenberg, 2024).

Globally, what distinguishes Poland from well-documented care exporting countries is that its workers are much older. While people in their 20s or 30s typically migrate from countries such as the Philippines or Indonesia (Henderson, 2022), the average age of Polish caregivers is around 55 (Nowicka et al., 2021; Kocher, 2024). This mobility often involves retired individuals, particularly former nurses and teachers. The main factor driving this activity is an unfavourable financial situation. For many women, working in Germany, where the gender pay gap is still three or four times higher than in Poland, is the only way to earn money (Neumann & Hunger, 2016). From the perspective of both the state and the workers themselves,

legal employment provides an opportunity to accumulate social security contributions and thus secure a decent pension, as Matuszczyk (2021) points out. It should be noted that many recruitment agencies have adapted their services to meet the needs of older prospective workers (Leiber et al., 2019).

4. Methods, data and analytical framework

This paper is based on qualitative empirical data that forms part of a doctoral thesis in public policy studies. The main corpus stems from 60 expert interviews with individuals involved in migration, social and long-term care policy in Poland (see Table 1). In terms of the gender of respondents, men dominated (35 people). The first group of interviewees consisted of politicians from the two main political parties (Law and Justice, Civic Platform), as well as representatives from the central administration, political advisors, academic researchers, and other policymakers. The research sample included experts with many years of experience in policy-making in the area of care migration issues, representing various institutions and political perspectives. Such a wide group were conducted thanks to the author's previous research (Duszczyk et al., 2019; Leiber et al., 2019; Matuszczyk, 2021), active participation in key stakeholder events and the snowball method. The second group of respondents comprised representatives of the commercial sector, including Staff administration or owners of private employment agencies sending (posting) workers as well as recognised field experts and policy advisors. Similarly, interviewees were selected purposively; mainly, people with extensive knowledge of transnational care maker, representing different care agency business models (corporations versus family-run).

Between November 2016 and October 2021, interviews were conducted primarily in person at the respondents' workplace or in public places, such as cafés. A few interviews were arranged remotely during the period of restrictions imposed by the pandemic. All interviews were recorded with the respondents' prior consent, and they were informed that their statements would be kept confidential and anonymous. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Due to the differentiation of the research sample and the varying times at which data was collected, interviews with individual stakeholder categories were coded using separate code trees. These code categories were linked to the adopted research questions and conceptual framework of agenda-setting (described below). The collected and organised material was subjected to qualitative content analysis, according to the analytical framework adopted by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Table 1. Summary of conducted interviews

Category of respondents	Number of interviews
Central public administration authorities	15
Politicians	6
Policy experts and representatives of NGOs	8
Actors of care industry	19
Academic researchers	12

Source: own elaboration.

To complement the field research perspective, I also conducted participatory observations as part of my data collection. This involved passively participating in several national events (such as conferences, symposia and congresses) organised by key organisations and public institutions between 2018 and 2022 (including the Office of the President, the European Institute for Labour Mobility and the Social Insurance Institution). Participating in these events, and taking notes during them, enabled me to identify the key topics and stakeholders involved in the issue of care mobility in Poland.

To analyse the agenda-setting process for care out-mobility, I employed a multiple stream framework (Kingdon, 1995). This approach is one of the most widely used in public policy studies for explaining why certain social issues appear on the public policy agenda while others do not receive the attention of policymakers (Ackrill, Kay & Zahariadis, 2013; Bruzelius, 2025). It makes it possible to answer the question of when and with which political and non-political actors an issue gains particular attention within a complex political process (Ackrill et al., 2013).

In his conceptualisation, Kingdon (1995) uses metaphors to illustrate the complex nature of public policy agenda-setting. He pointed out that the essence of this approach is the simultaneous consideration of three relatively independent streams. The first is the problem stream, which encompasses the various conditions and situations against which policy interventions are expected to take place (Sager & Thomann, 2017). In addition to indicators, especially those that change rapidly, focusing events such as disasters, accidents or pandemics play a special role, as Kingdon (1995) notes. The second element of Kingdon's model is the policy stream. This includes ideas and proposals generated by diverse groups, such as experts, government representatives and communities experiencing the problem (Sager & Thomann, 2017). Policy entrepreneurs play a strategic role at this stage. They are a diverse group of individuals who are goal-oriented, innovative, risk-taking and keen to actively influence the agenda on a specific public issue. They are also open to catalysing policy change. The third stream covers aspects of the political process, understood as the pursuit of power (the politics stream). As well as party politicians, public administrators, advocacy groups and lower-level bureaucracies also influence how an issue is perceived.

The key point of the multi-stream model is the convergence of the three aforementioned streams, which previously operated independently. Kingdon (1995) describes this stage using the metaphor of a window of opportunity. This is when a problem enters the consciousness of policymakers and the choice of solution, which was previously discussed in expert groups, is considered. A public policy agenda is then formed, but further legislative work is required.

5. Results: agenda-setting on care mobile workers between 2004-2019

Applying the multiple streams framework allows us to systematically collect material and clarify which interests emerged during the politicisation of labour emigration in Poland. The following explanation outlines this process from the perspectives of the problem, policy and politics streams. In line with the assumptions, particular attention is paid to the political and commercial actors involved in organising and facilitating mobility of Polish workers to Germany's home care sector.

5.1. Wicked care (business) issue: problem stream

The issue of the permanent and temporary emigration of Polish workers abroad since 2004 has received little public attention for a long time. During my research, I found that it had not been recognised as a significant social or public issue. One possible explanation for this may be the entrenched view in the 2000s that Poland, like other new EU member states (e.g. Careja, 2013; Roos et al., 2025), 'exported unemployment'. Consequently, the mass outflow of citizens was seen as an opportunity for the Polish economy and society in the long term rather than as a threat. However, it was not until around 2007 that a general awareness of the negative consequences of the post-enlargement out-mobility of Poles began to grow as indicated by several interlocutors. Notably, this awareness on that was rather broad, with little consideration given to the sectors in which Poles were in demand abroad. Interest in the long-term effects of economic emigration increased during the second nationwide Demographic Congress in 2012, which brought together policymakers and researchers to discuss population change. Consequently, the high level of emigration was gradually linked to the growing care deficit in Poland, particularly in peripheral regions (see Duszczyk et al., 2019).

As the collected material suggests, for a long time, home care work was not considered a professional, gainful activity. Considering the above, the increasing number of Polish workers employed in the home care sector in other countries was not considered an issue requiring special attention or action. Some experts have suggested that Poland is losing out to Western European countries in the fight for workers in labour-intensive sectors, such as construction and agriculture. According to these experts, this is a rational decision by Polish mobile workers who are seeking better wages and working conditions than they could expect in Poland. The willingness to emigrate, coupled with the good reputation of hardworking Poles, means that, as one interviewed politician noted, '*Germans swallow Polish workers*' (Interview with politician, 5).

The lack of reliable data depicting the scale or intensity of care migration is not insignificant in the silence surrounding that phenomenon. Unlike countries with strict policies on workers leaving the country, the exact numbers, destinations and characteristics of those participating in circular migration are not known in Poland. Interestingly, only representatives of the care industry were able to provide general estimates of the number of care workers from Poland in recent years. Therefore, the lack of reliable data reflects the difficulty in classifying mobility as a problem or a challenge.

Although the out-mobility of care workers has not been a significant area of interest for policymakers or researchers, the topic has entered the public sphere due to the involvement of the care business community and trade unions. Their activity increased after 2011, when the German labour market was fully opened up to workers from Poland and other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Adam Rogalewski is a key figure in raising awareness of the negative aspects of transnational mobility among Polish caregivers, as highlighted by the various communities interviewed. Thanks to his experience of working for the largest national trade union (pl. OPZZ) and his research into the labour migration of Polish care workers to Switzerland (Rogalewski, 2018), he has become a policy entrepreneur, initiating discussions at national and European levels. Notably, he was also the rapporteur of a strategic opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (2016), marking a turning point in problematising the mobility of carers, the impact of employment in the informal economy, and the absence of specific legislation.

A representative of a trade union noted that the greatest number of abuses by employers occurred in the posting of workers to the care sector [Interview with trade union, 2]. Despite having EU citizenship and the right to free movement, according to another research participant, more than 80% of people working in care in Germany are doing so illegally. Representatives of employers' organisations who are lobbying to 'civilise this vast market' have raised the issue of modern slavery, which can be seen in cases involving migrant caregivers employed by individuals (Interview with expert from care industry, 5). As they pointed out, this phenomenon was first described in a daily newspaper in 2019, which explicitly referred to Polish care workers in Germany as modern-day slaves. As one expert dealing with the care market explains:

„Migration of Poles is a problem of a little bit of everything you said. But if I were to do weighted averages, the biggest problem is the exploitation of the rights of Polish female workers and abuse. It hits the relatively most vulnerable people in the labour market”. (Interview with expert from care industry, 6)

Those in the so-called immobile age group (45 and over) who decide to take up employment outside Poland are repeatedly victims of illegal practices by intermediaries or families in Germany. A similar trend sees carers from Slovakia moving into private elderly care in Austria (Chau, 2020). The poor economic situation forces mainly women in their 50s and 60s to take on physically demanding work in Western countries, often without a contract or guaranteed minimum level of security. *“On average, these caregivers are already of an age where they will not be able to perform this service in Germany or Poland for much longer,”* noted an academic expert (Interview with academic expert, 45). The owners of agencies sending caregivers to Germany emphasise that the most common irregularities concern working hours and social insurance contributions. It is noteworthy that the representatives of the care agencies interviewed tried to convince us that the allegations about working 24 hours a day are untrue and harm the interests of legitimate market players. However, the interviewees themselves are aware of the common practice of cheating workers out of wages or pension contributions. An expert from one of the public institutions spoke about the overall scale of the problems:

„We presented the problems reported to us by the complainants, that is, first and foremost, non-payment of wages, problems with working beyond the hours agreed with the Polish entity and lack of compensation in connection with this and the third element was bad, inadequate accommodation conditions, below a certain standard expected. We also had issues of discrimination against Polish citizens, of poor treatment. Today, this range has changed - today it is the lack of a minimum wage, in line with German regulations; the second is the problem of, for example, performing round-the-clock care and working hours, because, for example, 24 hours, and the third is the mistreatment of employees and the lack of decent conditions”. (Interview with expert from central administration, 33).

One little-noticed problem is that mobile workers are falling out of the social security system in both Poland and Germany. This is often the result of a deliberate strategy by employers (or intermediaries) and the workers themselves to avoid contributing to social security. However, some of these individuals have no other means of obtaining insurance in Poland, which results in gaps in their contribution periods (Matuszczyk, 2021). A social security specialist has highlighted the growing problem in this regard, pointing to the example of workers posted to the care sector. This can result in low pension benefits and put an increasing burden on the

social welfare system in the workers' home country, where they may seek support (Interview with central administration expert, 9).

It is important to note the increasing popularity among mobile care workers of raising the issue of gendered structured vulnerability (Lenard, 2022). They use social media groups and diary entries, for example, to publicise cases of exploitation by intermediaries or German families. One interesting example, as highlighted by a researcher working on this issue, is the diary written by a caregiver, which reveals the realities of working in a 24-hour care model [Interview with academic expert, 6]. A trade union representative has assessed this type of practice as a manifestation of the growing agency of domestic care workers from Poland. In line with Kingdon's (1995) terminology, they become 'information brokers' with unique knowledge of the determinants of transnational home care work. Consequently, through the collection and sharing of 'behind-the-scenes knowledge', the carers themselves have a significant influence on how the issue of leaving home is framed (Rogalewski, 2018).

5.2. „No policy” approach: policy stream

The growing awareness of the issues associated with Poles working in the home care sector did not lead to the development of policy measures or public interventions. Before the onset of the pandemic, neither political initiatives to improve the rights of mobile care workers nor ideas to regulate intermediaries in the care industry appeared on the political agenda. When asked about legislative work or the involvement of social partners, representatives of the central administration and politicians could not cite any specific examples relating to care migration from Poland. The only example identified during field research was an attempt to include some elements of the free movement of workers in Polish–German relations. One policymaker from the central administration pointed to meetings between ministers from both countries that he had attended in the 2010s. He drew attention to the rather general bilateral discussions, in which the Polish side tried to put pressure on their German counterparts:

„There were meetings at the level of Polish and German ministers and this topic was politically discussed. There are some regulatory ideas there (...). This topic mostly came up in passing. From time to time, we have thrown in international affairs at these meetings, certainly in the last few years, to raise this topic a bit, to put pressure on Germany”. (Interview with central administration expert, 44)

The quoted interlocutor added that, during these meetings, the focus was primarily on violations of the rights of migrant workers from Poland. He stressed that the Polish representatives had only made diplomatic requests, which the interviewee paraphrased as, 'Just don't exploit Polish or Ukrainian women in an extreme way'. Unlike the use of emigration bans as 'political leverage' to renegotiate carers' working conditions in Asian countries (Yeoh et al., 2020), there have been no attempts to restrict the transnational mobility of carers in Poland.

The only authors of the legislative proposals to regulate the outflows of Polish workers were representatives of two profit-driven associations in the transnational care industry. These are the Section of Care Agencies (SCA), which operates under the Section of Employment Agencies, and the European Labour Mobility Institute (ELMI), a think tank. These bodies' fundamental aim is to combat unfair competition in the industry, support legitimate actors in the cross-border space, lobby, and represent their members' interests. As people associated with these two organisations have pointed out, they place a lot of emphasis on cooperating with

representatives of the central administration or politicians interested in the affairs of Polish enterprises. Thanks to their knowledge and financial resources, they are able to publicise important issues in the media and reach a wider audience with their message. In ELMI's public position paper, sent to the Labour Market Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in 2013, the authors explicitly refer to the need to combat networks of illegal recruiters and improve the reputation of care companies in Germany. Furthermore, they argue that promoting the legal posting of care workers from Poland would reduce unemployment without encouraging permanent emigration, generate substantial revenue for the state budget, and represent one of the few competitive advantages of the Polish economy within the European Union.

Experts from these two organisations participate in all major events that attract the attention of politicians and central administration representatives, and they frequently speak at such meetings. Importantly, both organisations hold their own conferences, providing a platform for proposing solutions and facilitating discussions with the relevant community. Every year, the SCA organises a national conference, inviting key decision-makers and experts, including the head of the Social Security Institution, National Labour Inspectorate directors and ministers. SCA has also organised meetings for carers and individuals interested in working in the sector to raise awareness of the risks involved in working without a contract or with an intermediary acting in contravention of current legislation. Since 2013, ELMI has organised the European Labour Mobility Congress, the largest event of its kind in Europe. As well as the most important Polish institutional figures, the events are also attended by EU Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament, who play a key role in shaping EU legislation.

Another example of a proposed policy change in this area is the idea of rewarding care companies and employment agencies that promote ethical standards and provide decent employment conditions. Similar initiatives are among the most common ways of protecting mobile workers at risk of exploitation by unscrupulous intermediaries (Yeoh et al., 2020). Those involved in the commercial care market who promote legitimate practices argue that certifying private labour market intermediaries in Poland is a valid idea. According to some experts, obligatory registration in the National Register of Employment Agencies does not allow for the distinction of agencies that wish to act transparently and in accordance with the codes of ethics developed in their respective industries.

The collected material suggests that the representatives of the aforementioned organisations, which bring together entities from the care market, are aware of the lack of partners with whom to discuss public intervention with the Polish government. Consequently, both organisations have made considerable efforts to engage with actors in European institutions. This includes active participation in collegial body meetings in Brussels, cooperation with MEPs, and forming a coalition of advocates with EU-based employers' organisations. Furthermore, ELMI's experts were involved in work relating to the amendments to the Posting of Workers Directive and the associated Enforcement Directive.

Trade unions have proposed ideas to improve the employment conditions of mobile workers in this sector. However, their role is considered negligible and out of step with the realities and specificities of work in private households by those in the commercial actors' community. Interestingly, the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (pl. OPZZ) is the largest organisation to have taken an interest in this issue, establishing cooperation with the Fair Mobility initiative set up by the German trade union DGB. The latter initiative's employees actively support workers in Germany, primarily by providing advice and assistance in pursuing claims against

employers and intermediaries. The Polish organisation's capacity in this domain is limited, though its representatives have raised the need for all employees to be covered by employment contracts. This is not an original initiative, but rather an official trade union position on ensuring the security and stability of employment for all workers.

5.3. Invisible and forgotten topic: politics stream

The issues surrounding the phenomenon of care migration have so far been poorly addressed on the political agenda. The topic has not been politicised or discussed politically before 2020. As in other highly developed countries, transnational domestic care is invisible, hidden from public view and too easily forgotten by legislators and others (England, 2017). This was confirmed during the interviews by members of the Polish parliament who, although they did not deny the importance of the theme of Poles' circular mobility and their vulnerable situation, could not point to examples of public or behind-the-scenes political debates around this issue. Thus, this topic has not become the subject of political party programmes or political disputes of interest to the wider public. Inquired politicians noticed only the growing importance of migration brokers in Poland, but looked at this phenomenon through the lens of dishonest players exploiting aspiring migrant workers.

The implementation of the research, however, made it possible to establish some universal regularities about the political elite in Poland and their avoidance of sensitive social issue and wicked problems. Central government's staff, political advisors and academics identified reasons explaining the ignoring of the topic of care migration from Poland. First of all, politicians are selective in their treatment of social problems and do not delve into their essence. According to the research participant, there has long been a lack among politicians of a long-term view of the strategic importance of the situation of out-migrants as well as the deepening care deficit in Poland. Instead, a 'here and now' approach prevails. What is more, political elites in Poland are interested, as pointed out by academics and political advisors, mainly in the indicators and political consequences of addressing a public problem. One representative of the public bodies perceived that in the case of care, it is impossible to present a balance sheet of gains that could appeal to some politicians:

„(...) decision-makers pay more attention to sort of real economic impacts. So that it can be shown that GDP has increased by so much, other indicators have increased by so much. There is such a private sphere here. Quite difficult, because it takes place in a grey area, unstructured, unregulated, a bit in the wild”. (Interview with expert from central administration, 29)

Another reason for the lack of political attention to transnational domestic care is that mobile workers do not form a cohesive diaspora that politicians can address with specific measures or support. Although the Government Programme for Cooperation with the Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad 2015–2020 provides support for mobile workers, including consular support, it does not address the specific characteristics of the various groups of mobile workers present in the global labour market. The hypermobility of care workers and the fact that their centre of vital interests is primarily in Poland means that they are not covered by the solutions implemented as part of the policy towards the Polish diaspora.

The discussion on transnational domestic care and the role of Polish workers in this form of mobility is part of a broader process of political elites' long-standing neglect of emigration

issues. Since the politicisation of emigration, politicians have focused their attention mostly on the re-emigration of Poles who left for EU countries after 2004, especially of young and well-educated individuals and families. Successive prime ministers, presidents and ministers have addressed their appeals about the attractiveness of Poland and incentives to return to this broad group. For instance, one of the experts interviewed recalled how, in 2017, Prime Minister Morawiecki visited British universities, encouraging Polish students to return to Poland once they had completed their studies. Furthermore, the research revealed a certain correlation. During the interview, a Law and Justice politician referred to the departure of Poles as a loss of human capital and challenge Poland's security. Conversely, a politician associated with the Civic Platform emphasised the importance of European freedoms for Polish workers and the professional integration of disadvantaged groups.

The lack of interest in the situation of migrant caregivers is also due to the lack of representation of the profits of this population of mobile workers. Furthermore, as field research revealed, the general aversion of politicians to discussing elderly care, regardless of the context: in Poland or abroad. Moreover, policy makers, as explained by the interviewees, may subconsciously fear that addressing the topic of transnational home care may mean proverbially 'putting a stick in an anthill' or opening the black box which will consequently reveal the wide scale of neglect and problems in the process of mobility workers from Poland. This was aptly summarised by one expert specialising in cross-border care market issues:

„The more current topics win out over the topic of care. (...) this topic is present, but rather in cross-border relations, i.e. Polish caregivers posted, sent to other Member States. This is yes, but as far as Poland is concerned, it is not there. Politicians think that for the next two decades these care problems will be solved by the hands of the families, the members who take care of these people”. (Interview with expert from care industry, 19).

Surprisingly, the low level of engagement of politicians with cross-border care market issues was criticised by representatives of the commercial care sector. The head of one care agency, which posts workers, spoke directly about this, pointing out that politicians themselves employ foreign workers:

„And workers in the care industry are not salt in the politicians' eyes. This is because there is a huge demand for this type of labour and even these politicians have fathers and mothers who are sometimes in an agonal state and they sometimes need someone to take care of them. They need de facto servants”. (Interview with representative of care agency, 38).

Another participant with expertise in transnational care market also expressed a similar view, while recognising a different problem. Politicians may look one-dimensionally at mobile care work and inappropriately try to regulate this complex issue:

„The danger may be that politicians come up with an interpretation of home care that this care should be from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday to Friday. And that is the job of the carer. And no one is going to ask themselves - what about that client on Saturday, on Sunday”. (Interview with expert from care industry, 20)

The above excerpt of statements shows the general concerns that representatives of care companies have. They fear that a misperception of the specificity of care provided in the client's home may lead to a misguided way of regulating the international mobility of workers. At the

same time, business owners who are active in the care market and seek to improve the general rules governing this market are critical of policy measures to support their business. During the interviews, they repeatedly criticised the frequent changes in EU legislation (uncertainty of the law) and, above all, the lack of adequate and effective involvement of Polish government representatives in this topic. They assessed the inability of decision-makers to defend the interests of Polish companies accused of social dumping or other illegal practices in EU countries.

5.4. Keeping status quo: closed windows of opportunity

According to Kingdon's logic (1995), convergence of the three streams should open a window of opportunity, meaning a given issue appears on the political agenda. However, an analysis of extensive source material on the growing mobility of Polish care workers before the outbreak of the pandemic confirmed that this issue had not been identified as requiring strategic public or political intervention. Before 2019, the biggest obstacle to legislative or strategic work on transnational home care was the lack of proposals for instruments and the low level of interest in this issue among political elites. Unlike centrally managed migration channels, e.g. from the Philippines or India, it should be emphasised that EU Member States have a very limited range of solutions available in this area. Mechanisms for bilateral cooperation, such as coordinating national labour inspectorate activities and cooperation on the posting of workers, have so far been poorly implemented (see Lillie et al., 2025).

Interviews with key political and non-political actors in Poland confirmed that transnational home care involving Polish caregivers has not penetrated the mainstream political discourse. In other words, the topic has not been politicised and has not been the focus of mainstream political groupings in Poland. Despite partial awareness of the phenomenon and its magnitude, politicians still have not addressed the topic as relevant and requiring state interventions. The identified list of factors and circumstances sheds light on why exactly this topic remained neglected by decision-makers. Interestingly, in contrast to other emigration countries that derive tangible benefits from temporary work abroad (Pyle, 2006; Henderson, 2022), the Polish state has not attempted to actively support mobile workers. Although the government in Poland benefits from the legal form of outmigration (mainly by paying social security contributions to the Polish Social Insurance Institution and consuming the 'Germany wage' in Poland), there was no awareness of the need to counteract entities that violate the basic rights of workers and thus work to the detriment of the Polish economy.

Commercial care sector actors remain the main stakeholders in the context of initiating evidence-based, non-political discussions on cross-border home care. Thanks to the efforts to raise awareness of transnational home care between Poland and Germany, as well as lobbying activities, some members of the community can be considered policy entrepreneurs. As the only stakeholder group, they are trying to push through their own innovative solutions. However, these have not yet initiated profound political change. Until 2019, they were mainly perceived by political decision-makers as unscrupulous business actors who exploited loopholes in the law and were difficult to control, as confirmed by empirical evidence.

6. Conclusions

This article aimed to clarify the extent to which the topic of the out-migration of domestic care workers has been addressed on political agenda in Poland. Although the article focuses on the level of regulation of worker mobility within a particular sector, the findings presented reveal general patterns underlying emigration policies in countries where the migration industry is playing an increasingly important role in facilitating labour mobility (Andrees, 2020; Matuszczyk & Bojarczuk, 2024). As the literature review suggests, the political dimension of this issue is one of the most neglected areas of research. To date, knowledge in this area is mainly limited to examples from Asian countries, where sending facilitation mechanisms orchestrated by migration brokers have been developed over many decades (Walton-Roberts et al., 2025). To the best of my knowledge, this is one of the first study to attempt to show the extent to which an EU member state is regulating the mobility of its own citizens within the EU.

Referring to the question of the article's title, in Poland we are faced with the migration of domestic care workers being ignored by politicians while for-profit organisations encourage the departure of further would-be mobile workers. Maintaining legal channels of mobility, especially the posting of workers, and combating unfair competition can lead to tangible benefits for Poland's public finance system. Unlike in developing countries, the mobility of workers from Poland to the home care sector is unlikely to be a focal point of the state's emigration policy. Paradoxically, the public authorities fail to see the benefits in terms of economic activation of women around retirement age, especially those from peripheral regions. These conclusions are consistent with observations made in Romania (Careja, 2013) or Lithuania (Bryer et al., 2024). This situation is efficiently exploited by sending care agencies, which can reach disadvantaged socio-economic groups in Poland. Thus, they create a rapidly growing business-run export of domestic care workers, making Poland the EU leader of the well-prepared 'army of caregivers'.

This article sheds light on the steadily strengthening position of commercial entities whose activities facilitate intermediated temporary labour mobility within the EU (Danaj & Meszmann, 2024). Thanks to their resources, private intermediaries can organise and sustain the circular mobility of care workers and make their own political claims. Further empirical studies of countries such as the Czech Republic reveal a concentration of similar economic policy processes around the transnational mobility of carers (Uhde, 2025). Recent studies show that intermediaries' activity increased during the pandemic (Nowicka et al., 2021; Palenga-Möllenberg, 2024), and we can expect further political engagement from private labour market intermediaries in sending countries.

Several limitations must be acknowledged in this paper. Although the timeframe covers several years, it is limited to the period immediately before the outbreak of the pandemic. Recent studies have revealed that the topic of transnational domestic care has gained momentum in the media and political spheres. Despite this incremental political change in the treatment of the issue, it has yet to be incorporated into mainstream migration policy or the labour market. Further research must consider the context of the 2022 European Care Strategy, which signals the ongoing prevalence of transnational domestic care within the European Union. Comparative studies on the establishment of emigration policy agendas in Central and Eastern European countries, which have become a source of cheap, skilled and mobile care workers, will make a significant contribution to research on the 'emigration turn'.

Acknowledgement

This research is part of a studies funded by the National Science Center in Poland (Preludium grant number: 2017/27/N/HS5/00745 and Etiuda grant number: 2019/32/T/HS5/00131).

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