Come, Work, Leave - Labour Conditions Inflicted Upon Filippino Migrant Workers in Hungary, at the Semi-Periphery of Europe

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Submitted to: Central European University Department of Nationalism Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts

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Vienna, Austria
2025

Abstract

Within the volatile Hungarian legislative frames concerning migrant workers, the governmental decree 450/2024. (XII. 23.) provides a legislative loophole that allows for the Philippines to keep sending workers, while except for Armenia and Georgia, other countries from beyond the European Economic Area have lost this access. Correspondingly, in comparison to other third country national guest workers, Filipinos are present in significant numbers, yet their work conditions, journey overseas, informal migration structures, coping mechanisms and their ties to the actors involved in the fragmentation of labour power import, have mostly been discussed only in journalistic articles. In this thesis I discover the key points of precarity Filipino migrant workers face in the semi-periphery of Europe, adding valuable data and analysis to research written by Bodor (2024) and Meszmann and Fedyuk (2016). In the first half of the thesis, I provide a background of the Hungarian policy discourse surrounding migration and migrant work, then contrast these discourses with the growing labour power demand in the manufacturing sector. After introducing migrant workers' general statistical data and the state relations between the Philippines and Hungary, I analyse the semi-structured interviews conducted with the Philippine Embassy of Budapest, its Labor Office and finally, workers. The findings suggest that the lives of overseas Filipino migrant workers deployed in Hungary correspond to precarious lives faced by migrant workers thanks to the host-country's segmented labour market, institutionalised exclusion. Their flexiblisation and control is resolved via the fragmentation of institutional responsibility, creating both uncertainty and consequently, a rising level of informality. Finally, I analyse the self-conceptualisations responding to the emotionally and physically draining conditions, which often internalise culturalist images of one's identity.

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, **Edina Allegra Zelenyánszky**, candidate for the MA degree in Nationalism Studies declare herewith that the present thesis titled "*Come, Work, Leave - Labour Conditions Inflicted Upon Filippino Migrant Workers in Hungary, at the Semi-Periphery of Europe*" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography.
I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 14 June 2025

Edina Allegra Zelenyánszky

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my supervisor for rigorously remembering all our conversations, for listened to me ramble but also to carefully select my ideas and perceptions and for giving guidance to my thoughts; I want to thank my second reader for helping me in the research question formulations and giving me directions; and Judit for giving me attention and feedback on multiple occasions.

I would like to express gratitude to a great range of my friends: Koni, even though you are in Budapest, you managed continuously to check in and motivate me. Same applies to Barbi: thank you for actively listening, spending days of reading together. I want to thank Fanni for responding to all my doubts and for being available for all my occasional inquiries and random questions, and for genuinely showing interest in my topic. And to my dear girls in Budapest: I think it's a rarity to have such long-standing, stable and warm circle. Thank you, Anna, for always being you, for always having space for me in your life; and Maja, for supporting me and just generally loving me unconditionally.

And kind people in Vienna – the Daily Dish has kept me mentally stable; I appreciate it a lot that we were able to create an honest space where we all felt safe and comfortable. Ülkü, the fact that I could always count on you, your continuous presence, support meant a lot. And thank you Saagnik for the practical help, without your laptop on which I am typing, everything would have been a lot more complicated.

And most importantly, I would like to thank my participants for being open and putting their trust in me when sharing stories, occasionally being vulnerable, for being kind and welcoming towards my questions, for giving me more ideas both for interviewees and for afterthoughts.

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1. Introduction

"Orbán says: 'now you only have three years work here, right after three years, you go back to your home'. You cannot have a permanent residency here in Hungary. And then why? Why Orbán is like this?"

Orfeo, 40 (interviewee from Crowded Inverter Factory)

In the recent years both the statistical numbers and the public visibility of third country national migrant workers has increased in Hungary. This follows an almost decade long period when the country went through a political campaign built on migrant-hatred instigations (Bíró-Nagy 2025), where such propaganda posters as 'If you come to Hungary, you can't take Hungarians' jobs!' written in Hungarian, aiming to entrench hostile sentiments against the out-group (Reményi et al. 2022). Yet the dynamics of manufacturing companies that maintain production sites in the Eastern semi-periphery of Europe, in Hungary, required a number of employers, which, for various reasons was not answered by the domestic labour force. In my thesis, I define segmented labour theory as an indirect instrument of authoritarian neoliberal governance. In this context, I argue that the effect of the merit and non-deserving categories set up by the government of FIDESZ is also reflected in how the labour market is fragmentated. My choice fell on Filippino migrant workers, as the special position they were put in helped me narrow my scope down.

The legislation introduced at the end of 2024 further complicates the selection mechanism, by putting the Philippine labour force in a special position vis-à-vis other expatriate labour from South East Asia. Corresponding to both work-fare-based set of values promoted by the Orbán-regime (Szombati 2021), and nationalist discourses that centre Christianity within Hungarian identity, it can be argued that the governmental and meso-level presentation of Filippino guest workers construes them as especially hard-workers – aligning with the merit-based ideological system on

the one hand, and as very religious on the other hand – complying with the Hungarian Chistian values, promoted by the policies of FIDESZ.

I was curious about the situation and realities of Filippino labour migrants' realities. The main questions I seek to answer here is how the Hungarian semi-peripheral economy attempts to provide resources for production sites where domestic labour has been scarce; and on the meso-level, through which methods, law regulations, actors is the journey of Filippino workers facilitated; and on the micro-level, how the labour migrant life affects the realities of the 'imported' labour force themselves.

In the thesis I rely the most on five worker interviews, one interview with personnel from the Philippine Embassy of Budapest, and the Labor Office. All the workers were male, respectively between 30-40. As for the gender of the Embassy interviewees, for reasons of confidentiality I would like to keep it hidden. For reasons of confidentiality and the nature of certain situations and comments, I anonymised not only the participants, but all the meso-level actors involved in their journey to and work in Hungary. I conducted one interview with the vice-president of a labour-union federation and a lending agency, the content of these interviews is not used directly in this thesis, and I rely them as pilot interviews.

The thesis starts out with a theoretical overview of the systems of authoritarian neoliberal type (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2020) of governance relying on a nationalistic, selectively built in-group discourse and policies and how it intertwines with a selective labour market (Piore 1979 in: Zamudio 2001), which in the present context taps in to labour power made available from the Global South. I embed the current migration of labourers into the dynamics of accumulation through dispossession that occurred in some rural areas of the Global South, and I understand their employment in Hungary as part of the mobilisation of a flexibilised surplus population. In the

chapter following, with the help of scholars from critical political economy I sketch up the emergence of the automobile industry in Hungarian manufacturing. I move on to present the labour market changes with respect to selectiveness, and cite legislations relevant for the topic.

In the empirical data section of the thesis I analyse the semi-structured interviews from the perspectives of labour-relations, migration processes and identity conceptualisations. The first chapter of the analysis is centred around precarity and the lived experiences of the workers with regards to precarious lives; the second chapter discusses the roles and responsibilities of meso-level actors and places them within the neoliberal regime where institutional neglect and control seem to join hands; and finally in the third chapter I focus on how certain characteristics pertaining to the 'cultural' are being mobilised within the 'economic' (Tsing 2009). The thesis ends with summary of the analysis and its implications.

2. Theoretical overview

2. 1. Nationalist selectiveness and its relations to a global labour market

Since 2014 the Hungarian government has claimed itself to be a work-farist system (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019, Szombati 2021), and accordingly, it has developed political discourses and implemented social policies that dissect society into those who deserve belonging (with which both material and symbolic benefits come with) and those who do not. By using such terms as "authoritarian economic nationalism" and verbatim as "more state in the name of more market", Cahill predicted the taming of the seemingly contradictory relations between nationalisation and marketisation under a selective version of neoliberalism (2014, in: Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa

2020).

Under the differential structuring of social identities, among others, migrants had to be differentiated too. Reményi (et al. 2022) argues that the government has set up a good-bad binary within the group of migrant population. The authors categorise four migrant characteristics as 'good', from the perspective of the Orbán regime: those who align with the image of Christian and/or Hungarian values; those who are coming with the intention of helping; those who can afford to be migrants (in the form of investments); and finally, those who ameliorate the state of the economy through their work (Reményi et al. 2022). The newly created legal category of the guest worker (Megyesi & Magyar 2023) can be understood within the category of the 'good migrant', who contributes to the economy. Such theoretical differentiations, the legislative support guest workers enjoyed can be conceptualised as ways through which the state has been manoeuvring its responses to market demands in a selective manner, further fragmenting labour power along ethnic and culturalist lines.

As part of the co-serving dynamic between state and transnational capital, the labour relations have been adopted to assuage TNC's thirst for cheap and skilled labour power. However, in the context of Hungary, this co-serving dynamic is met with the decade-long political campaign that capitalised on xenophobia. The fear mongering and hate-instigation campaigns of 2015 and the following decade present some contrasts with what the chapter-starting quote refers to. The anti-migrant propaganda clearly and loudly declared that Hungary is to remain for Hungarians, and this selectiveness has been reflected in the social policies, the taxation system, family and reproductive policies, immigration regimes and labour market regulations.

To keep production cheap, and under control in times when the native labour force is either scarce or unwilling to fill in certain positions – which is the case in the Hungarian manufacturing sector – employers often hire migrant labour force, rather than raising wages or better working conditions so that the native labourers would be more willing to participate (Siar 2013, Stubnya & Bodor 2025). And concerning migrant labourers' employment and integration into the host-country's labour market, Piore (1979, in: Zamudio 2001) develops the theory of segmented labour market. According to the segmented labour market theory better paying, higher positions are reserved for the natives, while the rest, or the undesired are offered to the migrant labourer. As a consequence, labour migrants often experience, among other things, discrimination, segregation and deskilling. According to Piore's theory, immigrant workers are more likely to accept lower wages, decline union membership, accept substandard working conditions. Correspondingly, it can be said about the positions occupied by migrant workers in Hungary that they are most often employed in the secondary sectors, where employers expect low-skilled workers, and which positions are not prioritised by the domestic labour force, as these positions include difficult work conditions and relatively low wages (Bodor 2024). The experiences of downward occupational mobility, or deskilling fit into the theorisation that deskilling among migrant worker results from the host country's attempts to fill up scarce manpower in the secondary market (Bodor 2024; Siar 2013).

A segmented labour market often helps keep companies' wage-expenditures relatively low by employing an otherised group of people for lower wages (Siar 2013): those who are employed in the lower earning section are often constructed as less deserving, less productive. Within Hungary, such an example of ethnicity-based labour market segmentation applies the Romani population, who are often restricted to be employed in seasonal works or public works. Following the disintegration of the socialist labour market, Romani workers were pushed to the margins of the

labour market, constituting later parts of a 'reserve army of labour' (Ladányi and Szelényi 2003, 15). Returning to the segmented labour market's benefits for employers, temporary work agencies and governmental discourse occasionally claim that the availability of cheap labour force boosts the domestic workforce's chances of holding on to their jobs, otherwise the employer would transfer their production site elsewhere (Stubnya & Bodor 2025). These arguments can be used for political discourse to depict migrant labourers as necessary for production, justifying their presence with the betterment of native workers' positions, and thus moving them into the category of the 'good migrant'.

To embed the relations of transnational capital running production sites in Hungary, employing people of diverse national and ethnic backgrounds – with people from the Global South in the spotlight of this thesis – I rely on some Marxist world system-based global value chain literature. Momentarily the Global South has proven to provide valuable labourers not only to the European core, but to semi-peripheral countries such as Hungary too. If using the language of Marxist scholarship, such as world system theory (Wallerstein) or its further developed version, 'new international division of labour' (Froebel et al. 1980, in: King), one can interpret the inflow of South-East Asian labourers to the brinks of the European labour market, as the outcome of expulsion of rural labour[1] at the benefit of core countries' markets, that occasionally need and rely on a flexibly movable labour force. This expulsion, or accumulation through dispossession, the terminology coined by David Harvey (2004) is beneficial for core countries when their production cycles require an additional labour force. Intan Suwandi (2019) ties together the processes of dispossession occurring in the Global South with multinational firms' exploitative tendencies, that

[1] For instance Tania Murray Li (2011) studies the effects of landgrabs consequential of free-trade's spreading in the South-East Asian, but mostly Indonesian context, the effects of the penetration of neoliberal corporate food production on Indonesian social fabric.

extract this surplus, of reserve army of labour precisely from the Global South. The tension between a local, also racialized reserve army of labour – the Romani population – and the import of workers en masse from thousands of kilometres away presents a sharp contrast, seems almost counter-intuitive, yet the discussion of this tension has to be dealt with in another writing.

The way authoritarian style governance of the Orbán regime implements its own, authoritarian-nationalist type of neoliberalism, labour market segmentation is drawn along the good-bad constructions of the different groups of society (Reményi et al. 2022). As pertains for the interview subjects of the thesis, I argue that the inclusive selection of Filipino migrant workers is rooted in the intersection of such structural mechanisms and the political responses to them.

The authoritarian-nationalist implementation of certain expectations of the market both needs and reproduces a flexible, and relatively cheap labour force – which is deemed precarious by the researchers of migrant and guest workers (Meszmann & Fedyuk 2016, Sair 2013). As precarity entails a main thread throughout the analysis and in one way or another connects the chapters on migrant infrastructure and self- perceptions to the chapter on labour, a short definition seems to be necessary. The definition of precarity is dependent on time, place, context, yet the main features of precarious work include insecure jobs with uncertain employment continuity, the lack of possibilities for social protection, unstable guarantees of the future substantiation and reproduction of one's life and the shifting of responsibilities from the employer and the government onto the employee (Standing 2011; ILO in: Lewis et al. 2015, 585; Hewison and Kalleberg 2012). Many of these characteristics will return at different points of the interviews and the analysis.

2. 2. Political economy and labour market

The need and opening towards non-European migrant workers in the 2020s and the stagnantly rising number of people arriving from Asia since 2022 was mainly a response to the needs of production sites, whose owners and investors frequently are headquartered in foreign countries. To provide a comprehensive picture of the in this section I briefly introduce the political-economic processes of the Hungarian industrial sector, then narrow down the scope only to car manufacturing sites, as most of the workers whose experiences are vocalized in the thesis were employed in the car manufacturing sector.

Following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the Eastern European region presented opportunities for companies to manage their production more cost-effectively, or even cut costs, not to mention the low wages and the relatively high-skilled labourers (Szigethy-Ambrus 2024). As for why the central-eastern European region was so successful in attracting FDI, Bohle and Greskovits (2007, 457) argue that the inherited supply structures displayed complexity – physical capital and human skills and technological sophistication were in place already. What arrived in the 1990s was mainly market-seeking FDI, initially directed at bank services and trade, only for manufacturing and industry to become the main receiver later (Szigethy-Ambrus 2024, 26). The Visegrád-four countries had already specialised in electronic, machinery and automobile industry, and in addition, the FDI they received did not have to build, recruit and train from scratch, furthermore it was accompanied by policies directed at the accommodation of FDI (Bohle and Greskovits 2007; Medve-Bálint and Szabó 2024; Scheiring and Szombati 2020; Szigetvári and Túry 2024). With the EU accession conditions were made more favourable for Western capital and were institutionally formalised. In the Visegrád-four countries the FDI-based and export-led growth model have lead to foreign investors creating asymmetrical power relations, accompanied by unfavourable

distributional consequences, for instance, growing income inequality, instable labour markets, both empowering an illiberal political environment (Medve-Bálint and Szabó 2024, 13).

Following the 2008 crisis the tap on cheap Russian energy has been closed (Gagyi et al. 2024), making space for China to gain significance in the Hungarian foreign economic policy while German automotive industry relocated its foreign export manufacturing sites towards the East as a response to a decline in product life cycle and overproduction (Éber et al. 2020). Following the global economic crisis, those Hungarian counties that disposed of manufacturing industries as the dominant sector of FDI-inflow, began presenting elevated scores of production (Szigethy-Ambrus 2024, 29). The research of Lengyel and Varga (2018, in: Szigethy-Ambrus 2024) finds that in the counties Győr-Moson-Sopron, Fejér, Vas and Komárom-Esztergom the growing levels of quality of life and economic growth were materialised better, even in comparison with other counties where the level of FDI-attraction was higher, yet not in the manufacturing sector. Aside from sectoral differences between FDI influences, a domestic-transnational divide also fragmented labour relations and consequently, the social grid. Since domestic employers were mainly contracting low-skilled labour power, sectors dominated by transnational capital provided higher wages than domestic ones, yet it did not have a spillover effect on the lower wages in the domestic-owned sectors (Scheiring and Szombati 2020).

Transnational capital began diversifying in an East-ward direction in 2010, when both German and East Asian greenfield investments were welcome by increased state aid, friendly land lease prices, a flexibilised labour regulation and environmental policies (Gagyi et al. 2024; Szigetvári and Túry 2024). Following the 2010s, governmental strategies relating to foreign companies' actions in Hungary have begun forming a division of 'speculative' and 'productive' companies, which experienced differential treatment (Szigetvári and Túry 2024). The level of corporate taxation was

the lowest in Hungary (within the European Union), with sales tax being the highest (27%), whose burdens disproportionately burdened wage-earners (Éber et al. 2020). At the same time, alongside German, Chinese capital gradually penetrated more and more markets, using Hungary as a bridge to access markets of the European Union. For instance, the Hungarian Central Bank was allowed to use Renminbi as a reserve currency, which in exchange made the country attractive in the eyes of Chinese offshore investors (Éber et al. 2020). At the same time companies not just of China, but of South Korea and Japan set their foot in the production sites of electro mobility. Just after 2018 such names as Wanhua, Huweii, Samsung SDI, GS Yuasa, Inzi Contrls, CATL, Sunwoda Mobility Energy Technology, EVEP set up production sites in Hungary, all of them receiving significant amounts of governmental subsidies (Szigetváry and Túry 2024). Consequently, the growing significance of Western (most often German) and Eastern (currently South Korean, Chinese, Japanese) FDI-led competition strategy, implemented in a top- down manner has taken over a prevalent and dominant role in current Hungarian economic affairs. And finally, the heightened levels of production in sectors which are less attractive for local workers due to worsening work conditions and unsustainable wages, the number of guestworkers increases. As Bodor[2] describes it, with the betterment of these conditions, perhaps the domestic labour force would also be willing to fill these positions in, but it would go against the logic of profit accumulation and the state would risk losing investors.

I embed the empirical research into the macro-level structural factors of political economy shaping the Hungarian (electric vehicle) manufacturing industry. Micro-level experiences are derived from, embedded in, at the same time, co-constitute of these structural shifts.

[2] Stubnya, Bence & Bodor, Krisztofer. “Mosolygósnak mondják a filippínó vendégmunkásokat, de sokuk lesz depressziós Magyarországon. [Filippino guestworkers in Hungary are said to be all smiles, yet a lot of them become depressed.]”. *G7,* podcast

3. Contextual background

Policies beneficial to domestic and transnational elites are promoted under the interest of the nation, deriving justification from conservative values claimed to be unique to the 'national' values and tradition. Such policies for instance often promote selective welfare policies that prioritise ethnic Hungarian, heteronormative families, hinder the integration and helping of migrants and refugees (Scheiring & Szombati 2020). In the merit-based workfarist regime Orbán announced in and practices since 2014 entrenches inequalities along the distinctions of deserving and non.deserving. The selective policies of the Hungarian state have not been different in relation to labour migrants either.

Following the years of state socialism ethnic Hungarians and Hungarian speakers in Romania (Transylvania), Serbia and Ukraine were a desired source of immigration (Melegh 2016). Regarding the labour migration patterns of the Central Eastern European region, with the 2004 EU accession, the emigration rates increased in general (Hárs 2020 in: Erdélyi 2024). The 2004 EU accession and the consequent regulations on freedom of mobility placed EU citizens in a favoured position in comparison to non-EU persons. Yet Hungary remained on the border zones of Schengen, which made it attractive for irregular migrants wanting to access the EU (Hárs 2018). And in the case of non-EEA neighbouring countries, there is a differentiation between labour migrants, as seen through the preferential employment of Ukrainians, whose employment experienced even an upgrade compared to previous years. Ukrainian migrant workers were welcomed warmly in the Hungarian economy – even more so, when they came coupled with Hungarian ethnicity (Meszmann and Fedyuk 2016).

In the 2010-2015 period the number of Hungarians living abroad has significantly increased, but

the proportion of emigrees remained proportionate with that of the Central Eastern European region. In the period of 2015-2019, the pace of Hungarian emigration slowed down (Hárs 2020, in: Erdélyi 2024). However, the period preceding the COVID19 pandemic was characterised by fastened production which required the alleviation of the growing labour scarcity. This meant that in 2017 the government eased, then in 2018 completely erased the permit-conditionality of non-EEA citizens, such as Ukrainians and Serbians (Hárs 2020, 140). The increasing levels of labour shortage in 2020, that only slowly began descending at the second half of 2024 pressured the government to look for labour power beyond the neighbouring countries.

Before the pandemic, the number of migrant workers in Hungary was estimated to be around a hundred thousand, the newcomers mainly coming from Ukraine (Hárs 2020, 140-141). In 2025 the number of foreign citizens residing in Hungary is 255 450, according to the Central Statistical[3] Office out of which approximately 100-120 000 are guest workers (Bíró-Nagy, 2025). The Ministry of the National Economy published a report in 2023, detailing various demographic data about the characteristics of foreign citizens employed in Hungary. According to the report, in 2023 almost 40 000 permits were issued to non-European citizens (the chart distinguishes three categories: non-EU European countries; bordering third countries; countries beyond Europe). In contrast with the growing number of third country nationals, the number of EU citizens has shrunken with 13% from 2019 to 2024, while the number of third country nationals grew from 40 000 to more than 78 000[4]. The number of people coming from Asia has been mildly growing since 2001 until 2011, when a slight fallback happened, then grew steadily until the 2020s, and by 2025 it has almost

[3] "22.1.1.23. Magyarországon tartózkodó külföldi állampolgárok, az állampolgárság országa és nem szerint, január 1.*" https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0023.html

[4] Stubnya, Bence & Bodor, Krisztofer. "Mosolygósnak mondják a filippínó vendégmunkásokat, de sokuk lesz depressziós Magyarországon. [Filippino guestworkers in Hungary are said to be all smiles, yet a lot of them become depressed.]". *G7,* podcast.

doubled compared to 2020 (KSH 2025). If we look at the regional distribution of the top-10 non-European sending countries, South-East Asian countries (Vietnam, India, the Philippines and Thailand) account for 51% of the total[5]. Counting 10 000 heads, Filipinos make up the second biggest group residing in Hungary for reasons of gainful employment, following almost 20 000 Ukrainians.

Regarding the economic branches of the employment permits for third country nationals, 24,4% was issued in the manufacturing sector, 13,9% in construction and 11,9% in the repairment and trade of vehicles; regarding work positions, 50,7% of the positions in which foreign nationals are employed do not require any training or special skills. Concerning the proportion of valid work permits, 82% of the total was issued for people coming from Asia – and within Asia, the top five sending countries were Vietnam, the Philippines, India, South Korea and China. Employers reported 9662 Filippino persons, 2685 Kirgiz and 1916 Vietnamese persons to have established employment with (Nemzetgazdasági Minisztérium 2023)[6]. Exact numbers of actual Filipino guest workers in Hungary vary from 8000 (estimation of the vice-president of the Labour Union Vasas), to 11 210 (Flachner 2023).

The legal environment surrounding third country nationals' conditions of employment and residence has been rather unstable in the past years. For instance, a legislation regulating guestworkers' residence permits was supposed to enter into force on November 1, 2023. It would have made the guest workers residence permit available for those citizens who are not citizens of

[5] "A külföldi állampolgárok magyarországi munkavállalásának főbb sajátosságai a 2023. Évben." [The main characteristics of employment relations of foreign citizens in Hungary in the year 2023.] *Nemzetgazdasági Minisztérium.*

[6] "A külföldi állampolgárok magyarországi munkavállalásának főbb sajátosságai a 2023. Évben. [The main characteristics of foreign citizens regarding their employment in Hungary in the year of 2023.]" *Nemzetgazdasági Minisztérium.* (2023) https://nfsz.munka.hu/nfsz/document/4/0/4/9/doc_url/Elemzes_a_kulfoldiek_magyarorszagi_munkavallalasarol_2023_evben.pdf

EEA and would have maximized their employment period in 2 years. The legislation however did enter into force, as the government has announced its revoking. Instead, months later, the government has initiated a procedure securing that first Hungarians would be interviewed for every open position. Only those guestworkers are eligible for guestworker residence permit, who arrived at Hungary via a licensed lending agency or a preferential employer. Upon the expiration of the residence permit, it was the employer who was responsible for making sure that the guestworker leaves the country within 6 days (Megyesi and Magyar 2023).

The bill which introduced the new terminology of 'guestworker' and 'guest investor' was proposed in 2023, December 12th and came into effect in early 2024. It reregulated the conditions surrounding the employment of third country nationals' residence permits and opened the category of the 'guest worker', whose residence permit is strictly tied to employment. According to the legislation, the family unification rights of people coming from areas that do not belong to the European Economic Area (and are not from Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Norway) and come with the purposes of work, can be divided into two, depending on their educational degree they achieved. Those without higher educational experience, or in employment where higher educational papers are not necessary are not allowed to unify their families in the territory of Hungary (Megyesi & Magyar 2023). Simultaneously however, multinationals expect less and less their employees to have higher degrees, which lessens the chances of family unification of even those guestworkers' who possesses a diploma.

4. Recent developments between the Philippines and Hungary

"Thus, I do not want my country to become the country of guestworkers. Just as I do not want to see it become a migrant-country either. And this is why we are not letting the migrants in, and regarding guestworkers too, only as many as we must."

Viktor Orbán, December (21, 2024; Translation mine)

In the light of the specific focus of the thesis and the unfolding favourable treatment of Filipinos in comparison to other (South East) Asian countries, this section gives account of the most recent intra-state events and communiqués between the two countries. Perhaps the most recent major event related to the promotion of jobs in Hungary, was during the Philippines-Hungary Friendship Week Job Fair, held between March 10-16, 2025[7]. According to website of the Philippines' Department of Migrant Workers, which announced the event, Hungary is seeking 3000 applicants work jobs such as welders, machine operators, pipe fitter, hotel and restaurant workers and factory workers, with salaries ranging from 700 to 1000 euros[8]. The timing of the event coincided with the Hungarian national holiday celebrating the Hungarian Revolution of 1848 – it is up for the imagination whether the timing was purposeful or the anniversary coincided with the Hungarian government's intentions of attracting further Filipino workers. During the Friendship Week various

[7] "Sándor Petőfi at the First Hungarian-Philippines Friendship Week." *Cultural diplomacy Budapest.* March 19, 2025. Available at: https://culture.hu/en/budapest/articles/sandor-petofi-at-the-first-hungarian-philippines-friendship-week

[8] 3,000 Jobs Available in Philippines-Hungary Friendship Week Job Fair." *Republic of the Philippines, Department of Migrant Workers.* March 8, 2025. Available at: https://dmw.gov.ph/news-releases/2025/3000-Jobs-Available-in-the-Philippines-Hungary-Friendship-Week-Job-Fair

Hungarian cultural elements were displayed, amongst others, the Tagalog translation of Sándor Petőfi's poems and the screening of the newly released film, 'Semmelweis'. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Association for Central European Employment of Overseas Filipino Workers and the Philippine Association of Service Exporters, aiming to secure ethical work recruitment conditions[9].

In an interview[10] of 2023, Péter Szijjártó, the minister of foreign affairs approaches the consequences of labour shortage from the employer's perspective, emphasising the possibilities of the company moving away in the search for workers. He reasons that the temporary employment of foreign workers, on the long run, saves jobs for Hungarians. Szijjártó further emphasised the difference between illegal migrants and documented, temporary workers. Such statements conceptualise guestworkers as 'saviours' of Hungarian jobs – yet the emphasising of being documented, thus legal, implies the importance for all movement to remain under state control.

[9] "Philippines-Hungary Friendship Week celebrates bilateral ties, labor partnerships." *Manila Bulletin.* March 24, 2025. Available at: https://mb.com.ph/24/3/2025/philippines-hungary-friendship-week-celebrates-bilateral-ties-labor- partnerships

[10] Szijjártó, Péter. "Miértek – vendégmunkások Magyarországon" ['Whys – guestworkers in Hungary'] *Facebook.* August 30, 2023. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2003900539946478

5. Empirical data and analysis

In the thesis I narrow down the research to the presence of Filipino guestworkers, conceptualising it as the outcome of the Hungarian government's preferential treatment of migrant workers. The selection of the country responds to signs of the Hungarian government's selectiveness. At the same time, throughout the social media searches, I kept returning to contents created by overseas Filipino workers (OFW). According to the Government Decree released on the 23rd of December in 2024, 450/2024. (XII. 23)[11], residence permits of guest workers are only reserved only for 1) strategic partners of the Hungarian government and 2) for licensed rental agencies. It further notified the public that certain manual labour positions would function with limited eligibility criteria. In the legislation of December 23, 2024 only Georgia or Armenia were marked as unconditional suppliers of guestworkers, yet the decree determines an additional criteria, relevant to the background of the thesis: those third country nationals, who have an organisation or bureau responsible for the harmonisation of their documents with the legislation of Hungary and of the European Union, and that makes sure that the law-breaking citizen returns to their country of origin, are allowed to access employment and can be given work-related residence permit. The significant part in relation to the current topic is this last point of the decree is: out of all the South-East Asian countries sending workers in significant numbers (Vietnam, India, Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea) only the Philippines could remain as an officially accepted sending site. A brief section of the thesis delves into whether this exceptionality was a mere coincidence or a

[11] 450/2024. (XII. 23.) Változás a vendégmunkás-tartózkodási engedély és a foglalkoztatás célú tartózkodási engedély birtokában való foglalkoztatás kapcsán. [Changes regarding the residence permits of guest workers and the employment regulations in cases of employment relations with employment related residence permits]. *Magyar Közlöny.* December 23, 2024. https://enterhungary.gov.hu/eh/assets/tajekoztato2025-hu.pdf

premeditated step from the Hungarian foreign policy and economic policy's side; and discusses the justifications of such an exemption.

Back in the winter of 2024-2025 I started looking at documentaries on YouTube about the lives of guestworkers in Europe. As I was browsing some Deutsche Welle materials, I stumbled upon some vlogs recorded by Filipino overseas workers who came to Hungary as guestworkers. With some exceptions about wage and contract calculations all the videos I found were recorded in the person's mother tongue, thus the content available were mainly visual. However, I soon discovered that some YouTube accounts are registered with email addresses, thus I began reaching out to the content creators via email and comments, asking if they would be available for interviews to discuss their journey from their home countries and experiences in Hungary. My initial aim was to grasp the possibilities and feasibility of workers' solidarity in contexts where domestic and imported guest workers were present, however I soon realized that my level of integration and depth of contacts, the time limits would not allow me to delve deeper into this sphere. Then my focus of interest shifted towards the actors participating in the import of migrant workers, onto how the fragmentated supply of labour import allows employer companies to cut expenses off, what patterns of labour power preferences are present in current Hungarian legislative environment surrounding the employment of third country national guestworkers, and who are burdened with the responsibilities of employer-employee relations.

After reaching out, a few of them answered my emails, and eventually I met one person (Brando online, and four people (Orfeo, Jonathan, Matthew and Jack) in person. I got to two people via email, one of them then snowballed me to another three participants. Apart from on-site workers I conducted three semi-structured interviews with meso-level actors in the supply chain of labour power import: with the vice-president of the Federation of Chemical Workers of Hungary (VDSZ),

the Philippine Embassy in Budapest and a manager of a labour power lending and head-hunter company. When analysing however, I ended up citing the Embassy and the worker interviews, as the previous two proved to containing more indirect information.

I began coding the interviews while reading the transcriptions and listening the audio files, then organised the patterns and repeated phenomenon thematically. In the thesis no real names appear. The pseudonyms intentionally contain secondary meanings and at occasions, normative connotations.

Regarding the thematic analysis of my interviews, I derived implications of precarity from the above mentioned perspectives, and coded them as: 1) implications that being an overseas worker is a privilege as the competition to become one is harsh; 2) the relativisation of 'good' work experience with previously worse work experience; 3) the uncertainty about future work, living, income conditions and the need to always be on edge; 4) flexibility, referring to the instable micro-conditions of work and a constant readiness to move and change; 5) heightened vulnerability to meso- and macro-level actors such as employers or state regulations; and 6) family obligations, referring to their families' dependence on their overseas employment. The six categories were then merged into the three themes leading the analytical chapters: labour, migration process/infrastructure and self-perceptions.

5. 1. Research Questions

The main motivation of the thesis was to investigate how the Hungarian semi-peripheral economy's labour shortage effects the work and the embedding of selectively imported Filippino labour-power into the manufacturing sector's fabric. Within this scope, the thesis gathers and analyses information on the institutional responsibilities of state, meso-level, and micro-level actors who facilitate the import of the Filippino guest work, the potential future trajectories, the work conditions characteristic of present and previous employment, and on the discourses and narratives that workers use when conceptualising themselves.

5. 2. One priest versus two institutions – 1:0

As to illustrate one aspect of how and where institutions fail to respond to migrant workers' rights and needs, pushing them into a vacuum of responsibility where they are left to fence for themselves, I narrate the shared storyline of Orfeo and Matthew. Besides institutions' irresponsibility, even illegality, the uncertain, instable nature of migrant work will become apparent.

Both Orfeo and Matthew went through the same ordeal, tied to two misfortunate events occurring at the same time. On the one hand, the general decrease in the demand for German owned vehicle production[12] affected the Nógrád-based Van Transformer Factory's labour necessities too, which meant that around 80 Filippino workers who were employed via a temporary work agency were let go of. On the other hand, a governmental legislation change introduced in early 2024 increased

[12] Járdi, Roland." Válság az autóiparban: száz kölcsönzött munkavállalót küldenek el a kecskeméti Mercedestől." [Crisis in the car industry: a hundred lent employees are being released from Mercedes in Kecskemét] *G7.* June 29, 2024. Available at: https://www.vg.hu/vilaggazdasag-magyar-gazdasag/2024/07/valsag-az-autoiparban100-kolcsonzott-munkavallalot-kuldenek-le-a-kecskemeti-mercedestol#google_vignette

the minimum number of statistically loanable people from 500 to 1000, out of which minimum 500 must be Hungarian. The temporary work agency responsible for my interviewees, Unable Kft., could not produce these numbers, thus lost its license to operate[13]. Thus there were 80 Filipinos who were let go of by Van Transformer Factory, while their employer lost its license. Regardless, the according to the contract signed between the workers and Unable Kft. Obliges the agency to either pay the remaining months of the two-year contract or find them another company that would employ them. Yet this agency sought other ways to deal with the situation, such as sending employees back to the Philippines, thus getting rid of the obligation to either pay or find a new employer:

"Before they shut the company, they told us: 'we will pay you until November and December, a salary we will give to you'. Yeah, it happened. But according to our contract, since our employer is Unable Kft., they must pay the remaining months because my end of contract will be in March 2025. But my work there ended in November 2024, so I have a few months left there. But starting November, I got no work now, so December, January, February, March four months, they have to pay us. But Unable Kft. I insists: 'no, we will not pay you.' (...) You have to leave the country. This this agreement paper you have to sign this. (...) So of course, most of us don't want to sign this letter. "

Orfeo, 40

The least desirable scenario is to be sent home, back to the Philippines. They do not risk and invest so much in finding a job in Europe only for their employer not to fulfil the terms of the contract. With Unable Kft. not offering to pay them nor to transfer them immediately, they – and those dependent on them – fell into an instable situation, with their future means of subsistence became

[13] Karácsony, Zoltán. "Lejtmenetben a munkaerő-kölcsönzők: itt vannak a számok. [Temporary work agencies on the decline: here are the numbers] *HR Portal.* September 5, 2024. "Available at: https://www.hrportal.hu/hr/lejtmenetben-a-munkaero-kolcsonzok-itt-vannak-a-szamok-20240905.html

uncertain, while being extremely dependent and vulnerable to the institutions surrounding them, which expressed low willingness to respond to their legal obligations.

As reconstructed from the interviews, some of them went and paid a visit to the Embassy of the Philippines in Budapest, in the hopes of receiving help from their fellow nationals and from the long reaching arm of the Philippine state. Orfeo visited the Embassy three times, the third time to file a complaint against Unable Kft. Following various talks about immigration law, visa requirements and the final complaint against their employer, they received 10 000 HUF each. While telling this part of the story, Orfeo smile twitched into a bitter smile, as a way of reflecting the ludicrous amount and the lack of effective help. In Matthew's narration, the amount was 70 000 HUF, which were divided then among four of them. He reluctantly expressed how disillusioned he was after the visit:

> "I don't want to say any bad things about the Philippine Embassy because they are my friend of Filipinos and the government from the Philippines sent them here to help us, but they did not. (…) I expected them to help us fight for the right that we have regarding our contract. But, no, they only gave 70,000 Forints for four people, sad to say."
>
> Matthew, 36

The crisis had three different outcomes: a few people accepted the plane tickets Unable Kft. purchased them, 13 of them were interviewed by another temporary agency, and finally the rest of them left Hungary, travelled or ran away to Spain, Greece, Croatia, Lativa and Poland. In the case of the first group of people, the agency purchased plane tickets without their knowledge, not to mention permission. At this point of the story, the figure of the Priest Ezekiel unexpectedly

emerged. Matthew talked about the Filippino Priest with excitement in his voice, and told me about his intervention that prevented the deportation of some of his previous colleagues:

> "He's famous here because he always helps those Filipinos who want to have a new job, want to know about the contract. And then he's stayed there maybe 2 nights in the accommodation. (…) He slept there two nights, because some of my fellow Filipino have their tickets already because HR at Unable Kft. bought already a ticket for them. (…) Brother Ezekiel says: 'no, no one of you will go back tomorrow. You stay here. That's not your fault that you have a flight ticket tomorrow. That is your agency's fault. Don't go back home in the Philippines tomorrow. Stay here.' So that's why kuya Orfeo and some of my kuya Bobby, also one of my roommate there, stayed here. But to be honest, they had a ticket already."
>
> Matthew, 36

As for Matthew and Orfeo, they were among the 13 people who were interviewed by another temporary work agency, and then successfully made it past the interview rounds, ending up amongst the five people who managed to secure a job in Hungary, thus avoiding being sent home or having to run away. Their and their colleagues' story is about the institutional negligence of migrant labourers, the disposable nature of their contracts, and finally the strategies and internal narratives they use to resist both institutional mistreatment and emotional hardships.

5. 3. Labour

Upon asked about the lived experiences regarding their current positions in Hungary, all of my interviewees started out with comparisons between their present situation and previous jobs, rather than just describing the environment in their present occupation. The comparisons touched upon categories such as general work conditions (shifts, breaks, physical security), social relations (with

coworkers, colleagues in higher positions, with family members) and salaries. As will be demonstrated, their jobs and consequently the lives they live fall within the category of precarious life, regardless of the relativising undertone of their narratives and the occasionally significantly worse conditions they lived through. Coming overseas was generally conceptualised as a 'lucky', 'special' and perhaps 'deserved', but necessary situation, in relation to being able to provide for their families. Nevertheless, the comparisons were not exclusively made for the benefit of their current employment.

Regarding the thematic analysis of my interviews, I derived implications of precarity from the above mentioned perspectives, and coded them as: 1) implications that being an overseas worker is a privilege as the competition to become one is harsh; 2) the relativisation of 'good' work experience with previously worse work experience; 3) the uncertainty about future work, living, income conditions and the need to always be on edge; 4) flexibility, referring to the instable micro-conditions of work and a constant readiness to move and change; 5) heightened vulnerability to meso- and macro-level actors such as employers or state regulations; and 6) family obligations, referring to their families' dependence on their overseas employment. The six categories were then merged into the three themes leading the analytical chapters: labour, migration process/infrastructure and self-perceptions.

Out of the five workers I interviewed, two held higher positions in the Philippines and were deployed overseas in Hungary for the first time. By being employed as factory workers in Hungary, both experienced deskilling. As it is often the case with migrant workers arriving from less developed countries than the host one, regardless of their qualifications, they are employed in lower-status jobs – often due to language barriers, lack of local know-how or due to the host country's legislative system discrediting foreign credentials (Siar 2013). Before coming to

Hungary, Brando's position as office manager entailed a white-collar job, whereas the monotone feeding of the half-robotised machine with chicken wings required different, socially less valuable skills and falls into the category of blue-collar jobs:

> "Yes, you know, way back in the Philippines, I was an office messenger. I just always travel, I go to the bank, deposit the money, withdraw some money, get some check, do some paperwork, use the computer, the laptop, do some print, printing, scanning, Internet stuff. But here in Hungary, as a poultry processing worker, it is very different, you know. I am not used to, you know, to carry heavy stuff like a full crate of chicken. (…) Then on the first day my body is full, full of pain, it is painful because I am not used to it."
>
> Brando, 35

It was only Brando, who explained to me with excitement how he planned to join his sister working in Canada, where wages and family unification prospects were more promising. In the moment of writing, he already made it there. Similarly to Brando, Jack also experienced a slight downgrading with regards to the status of his position in the Philippines compared to that in Hungary. Out of all the interviewees, perhaps Jack was the shyest. Be it because of timidity, reluctant use of English or the fact that he has only began working in Crowded Inverter Factory a few months ago, he did not mention any future plans. But when he described the changes in his responsibilities and the turn of tables, his voice contains a pinch of bitterness:

> "I worked as a technician in [printer producer company in the Philippines]. Compared to here, it is hard for me, because in the Philippines, I'm the team leader, I managed 5 or 6 members, but here, in Crowded Inverter Factory, I'm the member. I handle 7 machines."
>
> Jack, 32

In their cases, deskilling was not accompanied by economic loss, as it is sometimes suggested in relation to the downward occupational mobility of labour migrants (Siar 2013). Their dissatisfaction about being employed in positions which require socially less valued skills was complemented with higher salaries, which were the initial motivators of their overseas deployment. At the same time, these interview excerpts can be understood as part of the deskilling processes that a segmented labour market inflicts upon its migrant labourers, in exchange for saving the employer the cost of raising wages. While reflecting upon the compromises their situation entailed, the deskilled overseas migrant workers vocalised slight disappointment and resignation. Physical hardship and the lifting of heavy objects was problematised by Brando, but for instance the different shifts were found to be tiring by most of them.

As regards deskilling, it is often presumed that the worker views his/her situation as temporary, in a way saving himself/herself from worrying over getting stuck in a lower-status position (Siar, 2013). While temporality can be conceptualised broadly, from seasonal work to fixed or indeterminate contracts, in their case the contracts were signed for two, two and a half, occasionally three years. If the 2023 regulation that allows family unification for people employed in positions requiring higher educational diplomas is combined with the fact that some workers are employed in a downward occupation, they experience exclusion on two levels at least. The instability and uncertainty guest-worker's residence permits and the inability to settle their families contributed to the institutionalisation of the migrant labourer's non-belonging (Jutvik and Holmqvist 2025). No long-term plans have been mapped out, and I was under the impression that they view the 'temporariness' of their work, as something permanent. In this respect, where the host-country keeps migrant workers only as long as their presence can be maintained with economic reasoning,

the marriage of market and state inflicts constant instability and uncertainty on them, which then becomes inherent to the lives of these overseas workers.

To further the thread of uncertainty, inhumaneness, instability, the comparisons and the relativisation of their experiences still happened within the definitional confines of precarity– although to different scales. For instance, Jonathan's description of the work in Taiwan corresponds somewhat to the Marxian conditions of slave labour[14]:

> "Way back in Taiwan, we don't have holidays because we have overtime. So sometimes after work we just clean ourselves and just take a rest. We don't have so much time for, like socialising with others because we just take a rest, rather than to go outside and, you know, have some fun. That's life being an OW."
>
> Jonathan, 37

Those who have already worked overseas, gave accounts of either explicitly dangerous, or directly exploitative and inhumane conditions, and contrasted that with their work experiences in Hungary. Orfeo was particularly confronted with many of the above-mentioned conditions upon working in the Middle East:

> "Work here [in Hungary] is easy. But when I work there, in the Middle East, before, I work night shifts. I climb, you know, a very high building when you build the scaffoldings [billboards], yeah. Lifting heavy objects (...) on a third floor building outside. We put in these stickers [of advertisement]. It's quite dangerous. We don't have any safety."
>
> Orfeo, 40

[14] The separation of abstract and concrete labour is what makes labour 'free', which is manifested in the separation of leisure and work time, in the original Marxian view. It is this little control that one holds over their time, which separates them from being a slave, in the views of Marx (1955, 145, 161).

To call their work in Van Transformer Factory and Crowded Inverter Factory ‘easy’, does not necessarily mean that the work conditions provided in the factory would automatically qualify as non-precarious. Precarity, if we were to talk about it as a class, is characterised not only by insecure lives, unstable futures and meaningless jobs, but also by ‘physically draining and demeaning’ and ‘long and unsocial hours’ at work (Standing 2011, in: King 2012). The above quote illustrates on the one hand, the general inhumane and unacceptable grounds of comparison some of the manual workers deployed in the Hungarian manufacturing sector went through; on the other hand, it puts into perspective the seeming contentment, even appreciation of circumstances regarding their present employment.

While Jonathan presented his story from a perspective of endurance and toughness, Matthew spoke from a place of righteous indignation, a sense of injustice, with a keen sense for distinguishing between humane and inhumane. He explicitly expressed the serious abuse of their physical and mental capabilities which greatly exceeded the ILO-recommended 8-hour work day (2019) and completely sabotaged the desirable maximum of eight hours of work per day, categorised as decent working hours by the Labour Rights index (2024), not to mention respectful or dignified social relations:

> “Because we only also work in Middle East before. For me, they gonna treat me as a slave. So sad. They are shouting at me: ‘do this, do this, come, faster! Faster!’ They treat you as a slave to be honest. (…) I'm telling this to you because this is the truth. (…) Yeah, because I work in McDonald’s before, yeah. I work in McDonald’s. I work in a chocolate factory too and you they don't want you to take a nap. They want you to work and work and work 19 hours per day. Try to imagine that, yes, 19 hours per day!”
>
> Matthew, 36

Filipino overseas workers are primarily deployed in the Middle Eastern region – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait being the most significant receiving countries (Philippine Statistics Authority 2024), where abuse and exploitation are not rare phenomena. Two of my worker interviewees were previously deployed in the Middle East, one of them worked in Taiwan for ten years. All three of them reported positively about their present environment in comparison to the former harsh, inhumane work conditions.

Similarly, Orfeo proceeded to calmly detail another perilous experience collected in the Middles East: following the two years spent in Qatar, he was deployed in the United Arab Emirates, where his employer instructed him to engage in activities that apparently have led to him become illegal in the UAE with the status of his visa:

> "In 2019 I was luckily selected in Dubai in UAE, United Arab Emirates. I've been working there in. It's more complicated job. It's all about scamming banks. By the way, at first I didn't know if this company is legit, but after a couple of months the manager told me: 'you have to make more banks to get…' 'Really? Okay…' So as long as they are paying me good salary... (…) If I would get on a plane, we'd stop over there and then they see my name, I will be arrested."
>
> Orfeo, 40

> "I used to lift heavy objects. Heavier than me. Before so, having a job here in Europe is kind of easy for me because the job here is like a – you know what we call in Philippines – it is like eating peanut. (…) I think from my past job, I think it's [the amount of breaks] OK. It is kind of a peanut for me because having 12 hours of duty back in Taiwan, it's draining, it's kind of exhausting. But my job here, it's very easy. It's just that you're going to stand for almost 8 hours."
>
> Jonathan 37

His experience points towards increased levels of vulnerability and exposedness to the needs and purposes of his employers in the UAE and Quatar, no access to put their rights to practice. In the light of the hazardous, perhaps even life-threatening conditions, standing eight hours by a machine, with ten-minute breaks and a higher salary does indeed seem like a better option. To approach the work conditions in the respective factories of my interviewees from another angle, even in the light of previously experienced vile circumstances, they leave much to be desired.

Familial relations and obligations were a recurrent topic, regardless of whether they were providing for their siblings, parents or to their own children. When Matthew told me how he had to provide for his nuclear family as being the eldest, his voice was filled with anger, bitterness and resentment. He abandoned his college education so that he could help out his parents, who at that point were raising 9 children. The pain in his voice and the slowly gathering tears were a reaction to not receiving the emotional appreciation he felt he deserved from his family.

> "I didn't save for myself because I give all my money for them. Try to imagine that. Even new pants. I didn't even buy the new pants, just only here in your country. It's so big drama. But you see, I always smile."
>
> Matthew, 36

Naturally, the emotional hardship is not necessarily representative of the economic struggles his family was facing in the Philippines. Nevertheless, the story of having to neglect his own needs, and having to prioritise the primary needs of his family is something that returned in Jonathan's

story as well. Jonathan began working overseas as a way to be able to provide for his mother's surgery. Similarly, Jack provides not only for his daughter, but to his siblings as well.

Aside from being the 'breadwinners' in the families – as some of them referred to themselves -, being away for years also means pain and emotional struggles.

> "But sometimes in my mind, I wish my kids and my wife would see it. My kids is 9 years old and my daughter is 15 years old. Every time I see a beautiful place here, I wish my kids and my wife to see this. If there's a chance I will bring my family here to have a vacation or if there's opportunity, why not to live here? But you know, Orbán, 'now you only have three years here, right after three years, you go back to your home' and then that no one can be regular. You cannot have a permanent residency here in Hungary."
>
> Orfeo, 40

Less expressive of missing his family, but Brando too vocalised disapproval of the legislation keeping blue-collar third country national workers from extending their time of employment and from bringing their families here.

> "The worker comes here without family. They don't have a thing to during the weekend. Sometimes if the company itself doesn't give them any work, they have two days that they're free in the whole week, sometimes they look for extra work. They want to be in an earning position, not to waste their time. If they are healthy, they are able to work right. For them having two full days of doing nothing is a waste of time. So it's not simply culture. I think if they have their families here it would be a different."
>
> Embassy

The legal obstacles that keep these men from bringing their families overseas causes not only emotional pain, but also pushes them to work more, to overexploit themselves, while the lack of social integration simultaneously maintains the temporary and uncertain character of their residence.

To sum up the examples provided above, the experiences of deskilling, the comparisons of inhumane jobs to their present positions, the value decrease of their skills some have experienced, the extreme dependence on their jobs which are temporary, and the emotional hardships that come with spending years away from their loved ones, align with the characteristics of precarity. The restriction of their time to two years and their desire to stay longer and bring their families displaces them to the brinks of society, and institutionalises their work as temporarily usable resources that maintain the smooth operations of transnational production. Furthermore, the flexibilised labour legislations and the exploitative relations between employer and worker (that bring more favours to companies, than to them) fit into the theoretical framework conceptualised by Suwandi (2019), namely that the Global South provides an available surplus population, easily mobilised upon the market's call.

5. 4. Migration process and the location of responsibility

As for economic or labour migration, the migrant always has to consider the potential losses and the prospects of benefits. In the case of Filipino overseas workers, the Philippine state has been intentionally facilitating the labour migratory processes of its nationals, making the entire endeavour safer, while also executing tighter control and surveillance over the migratory

mechanisms. Still, abuses often occur at the recruiter's end, most often in the form of illegally pouching the so called 'placement fee'.

Part of the state securing the wellbeing of its citizens is the reasons embassies are maintained. In the case of the Philippines, the number of overseas workers required the state to establish institutions so to answer to the welfare protection of its citizens. Such was the case in Southern-Eastern Europe: up until 2023, it was the Migrant Worker Office that was responsible for Filippino workers deployed in Hungary (and for a number of other countries as well). However, that changed when the Embassy of the Philippines in Budapest began developing its own migrant worker office. Following the informal recommendations of the Hungarian foreign affairs personnel, they named the unit 'Labor Office', to divert negative connotations associated with the word 'migrant'.

One of the most intriguing part of the interview conducted with the Embassy, revealed part of the state-level agreements, that on the long run facilitate the continuous import of Filippino workers into Hungary. As briefly mentioned in previous chapters, the Hungarian guest worker legislation changes introduced shortly before the Christmas holidays in 2024 did three things, relevant from the perspective of this section: it reduced the number held for non-EEA guestworkers from 70 000 to 35 000; it named explicitly two non-EEA countries whose citizens could continue receiving employment-related residence permits; and it allowed for countries to send their citizens in case they maintained an institution responsible for the legal employment of the citizens and for their deportation, if needed. This last point opened a legal loophole for the Philippines, as their Labor Office has already been planned to open for about 1,5-2 years. According to my interviewee at the Philippine Embassy:

"So, I would say whether the Hungarian Government made that solution tailor fit so that it

would allow us to be excluded from the ban, or that we just happened by coincidence to. You know, have the capacity to comply with their requirements is something that perhaps the Hungarian Government can respond to. (…) It's a bit of a chicken and egg scenario and not something that the Philippines side can respond to because we were not the ones who imposed these new requirements or imposed a ban on the deployment of workers in Hungary."

The Labor Office did open on time, thus the import of Filippino guestworkers continues undisturbed. As for how the Embassy facilitates, or what kind of practical help it offers for its fellow citizens, the storyline expounded in the introduction part of the analysis is quite telling. The experiences of the crew released by Van Transformer Factory received more efficient help from such a non-institutional actor, as a priest. Whether the limited capacities of the Labor Office are due to organisational constraints (such as low number of personnel) or to its scope of manoeuvre being legally impounded, remains unclear. The assumable reasons behind why the Hungarian government selected the Philippines worthy of remaining within the limited number of labour sending countries will be briefly discussed in the last chapter of the analysis.

As for meso-level institutional actors, the workers come in touch with at least three, but depending on the circumstances, duration of their stay, the number can double even. The percentage of third country nationals who are employed via temporary work agencies or directly varies according to nationality. In the case of the Philippines, 70% of their workers deployed in Hungary are employed via temporary work agencies[15]. It is the agency that is responsible for securing a source of income for the entire time of the contract, for registering those who run away. As for the process of arrival, Jonathan described it in the following way: the recruitment agency in the Philippines reaches out to the person in their database who they find eligible for a given job, who will then take part in a

[15] Stubnya, Bence & Bodor, Krisztofer. "Mosolygósnak mondják a filippínó vendégmunkásokat, de sokuk lesz depressziós Magyarországon. [Filippino guestworkers in Hungary are said to be all smiles, yet a lot of them become depressed.]". *G7,* podcast.

selection process and a medical exam. If the person passes these tests, he/she will be transferred to a Hungarian temporary work agency, which will be responsible for the worker then on.

An aspect of neoliberal work regimes and even of precarious work conditions, is the outsourcing of responsibility. Within global value chains, it is done through subcontracting and fragmenting the production processes (Tsing 2009). By responsibility outsourcing I refer to firms, brands, factories setting up worksites in regions where labour regulations are flexible and customed to the needs of efficient production; and to the already offshored production sites further subcontracting their workers – in this case, via temporary work agencies. In the Hungarian context, migrant workers are often deployed by temporary work agencies, which means that their employment is more flexible than that of directly employed personnel. Meszmann and Fedyuk (2016) in the context of Ukrainian migrant workers, found that the complex system of labour power lending is perhaps not the cheapest, but it creates a more controllable, thus more 'fluid' strata of workers. Temporary work and recruitment agencies in the description of my interviewees further strengthen this pattern. The intentions of disposing from responsibility in exchange for getting away with cheaper solutions and less hassle crystallised in this story of my worker interviews.

From the workers' perspective, transparency about the law and constant updates on its change were not provided, as I found out about the fate of some runaways faced upon arriving in Poland from the Unable Kft.-Van Transformer Factory situation:

> "But, if you are not selected… like my friends who were not selected, they went to France, Poland. Some of my friends in Poland, (…) they are not lucky, the immigration told them: you have to leave the country within one month. Because they have a case in immigration. When they requested the biometrics right to get your card, then in the system signalled: something is there. You're not eligible to get this card because you have a case back there in Hungary."
>
> Orfeo, 40

Another point where the workers can and often are taken advantage of by actors within the labour-power supply chain (Lindquist and Xiang 2014), is right at the beginning:

> "In my story at first, while we are attending our documents [his recruitment agency in the Philippines] requested you to pay at least one month of your salary. You know, the equivalent of your one month salary in Hungary. Which is around 36,000 pesos, I think $700 [around 565 euros or 228 000 HUF], we have to pay in cash. (...) we give everything to be here in Europe. (…) After we pay this placement fee, they will release our visa."
>
> Orfeo, 40

Similarly to Orfeo, Matthew also fell victim to the illegal activities of the recruitment agency in the Philippines. While Orfeo had to transfer his first salary, Matthew was required to pay a total of 39 000 pesos [613 euros or 247 000 HUF] to his recruitment agency – which in the meantime was closed, precisely because of its illegal activities. As for why he paid more than Orfeo did, he said he specifically asked them to transfer him to Hungary. After arriving, he sought help from the Philippine Embassy, who promised to help get his money back, but since then 7 months have passed without the Embassy returning to him with an answer.

As the micro-level of the migrant infrastructure fuelling the Hungarian labour-market, personal ties play a stable and crucial role in the advertisement, helping, socialising tasks while these mechanisms are naturally informal. The labour migrants who are contracted within a segmented labour migrants are recruited by officially approved recruitment agencies. Yet following or even during settling down, they share experiences and advice, they themselves become facilitators and key participants in fuelling the inflow of migrant work. Such is the case with the overseas workers I found on You Tube. While vlogging about the everyday occurrences in their lives, they also share

crucial insights on the jobs they attained, actively engage with comments inquiring about documentation processes, age requirements, placement fees, etc. Aside from gaining information on social media, some of my interviewees maintained connection with previous colleagues, this is why they were able to account for their fate following them running away. Life altering information – such as which countries harmonise their deportation system with the Hungarian temporary residence card system – spreads across these channels, some youtubers specialising in such info-sessions.

As for the lack of information or misinformation, my interviewees experienced a number of occasions where either the recruitment agency or their employer (the temporary work agency) withheld or misinformed them about the conditions and terms of their employment, or the legislation changes impacted their lives negatively.

"Way back in the Philippines we signed our contract 2 years plus one year, so it should be 3 years, right? But unknowingly, when we arrive here, we find out that they only offer two years. Two years contract, so the other one here is that they will transfer you to another company. So you know, it's different."

Orfeo, 40

"...before in Hungary there's some if you come, if you can get your family here in in Hungary. But they changed the law, the migration law, right? So I'm very disappointed. (...) So, whatever."

Brando, 35

When asked if Jack knew what his job would be when signing his contract in the Philippines, he answered with no. One finds out about the concrete position when already in the hands of the temporary work agency, who already contracted them to a company. Yet in the telling of the Embassy, misinformation about the position happened even at the moment of signing the final contract (with the company), and it was something people went and submitted complaints about at the Embassy. Besides misinformation, the meso-level actors have presented quite some instances where they proved to be irresponsible, inefficient and even illegal. Van Transformer Factory could release its surplus workers without major economic loss. Unable Kft. spent assumably a few million HUF on the unrequested tickets of workers. The Embassy sacrificed a few thousand HUF. Yet these people's situation was not efficiently helped by either of these actors, their priorities (to remain either employed or paid in Hungary) were protected the most by the unofficial figure of Ezekiel, the Catholic Priest.

5. 5. Conceptualisations of identity via culturalized images

The racial or ethnic factor of workers' identities is both capitalized on and often concealed by capitalism (Tsing 2009). Such racial, ethnic or nationality fractions of one's identity separated from the 'economic', and instead are perceived within the 'cultural'. By perceiving certain personal traits as if they were inherent of one's belonging, or identity, one can formulate different expectations, that in the context of wage work, do translate into economic gains and losses. The essentialisation of cultural, ethnic, gender stereotypes then serves to justify, explain and take certain abilities for granted. Such characterisations can even be internalised by the implicated

people themselves, including those involved in the supply chain of labour-power import. In the Hungarian context, where deservingness has become tied to 'good work-ethic' with the promulgation of a workfarist regime (Szombati 2021), the discourse justifying the exclusive import of Filipinos, seems to strengthen/build on some stereotypical, colonialism-rooted images of Asia.

Filippino cultural traits were often mentioned throughout the interviews, their connotations slightly varying, however. As for the concept of Filippino nationality, in worker-interviews, it often emerged as an imaginary protective shield. It was thanks to being Filipino and due to being Filipino that they are hardworking, tolerant, resistant to tough work conditions. On these occasions their Filippino identity functioned as a coping mechanism against harsh circumstances, and endurance was conceptualised, justified with the 'nature' of Filipinos. In the interviews Filippino identity appeared both as justificatory of complying with hard, even inhumane work:

> "Actually, we Filipinos are risk takers. We just need earn a lot of money. To provide for our families and at the same time to provide for ourselves. Like, is it legal or illegal? Sometimes we don't care, yeah."
>
> Jonathan, 37

Jonathan and Brando's reference to the nationality fraction of their identity normalises their economic submission:

> "We have one day of it is it is up to us if we're going to take that day off or not. But we are Filipinos. We go to our work."
>
> Brando, 35

At other instances, the direct opposite surfaced, whereas Filippino identity was perceived as a source of resistance, perhaps precisely against firms attempt on the capitalisation of their ethnic belonging. In relation to the slave-like treatment Matthew experienced in the Middle East, he conceptualised the deservingness of humane treatment on the basis of being Filipino:

> "I know the right that I have. I'm not an only a Filipino. I'm a Filipino in my mind and in my heart. So I know to fight for what I have, I talk to my manager and to the office because I'm not a robot anymore. I need to take a nap. I need to take a rest."
>
> Matthew, 36

The two-sided conceptualisations of their national identities form an interesting contrast. Jonathan's and Brando's way of internalising an essentialised image of their nationality could be used as a way to justify, perhaps even prolongate their exploitation.

Historically, for capitalists the categories of citizenship, race and gender have been operationalised for the sake of greater exploitation. It is expected that when workers are divided into distinct positions based on these categories, the wage/job competition would translate into intraclass conflict, co-optation, interclass collusion or exclusion (Zamudio 2001, p 117). As for contrasts with other nationalities, occasionally some reluctant resentment has been voiced, mostly against Ukrainians, but the higher salary of Hungarians has also been mentioned. On one occasion, deservingness and good work ethnic surfaced in relation to two Ukrainian colleagues whose attitude did not express the gratitude their positions would demand in Matthew's eyes:

"You know, the Ukrainian people always act that they are the boss. If you work in a company and then you act like that... I will grab you and take you inside the HR department. (…) You are so lucky because you are work here, in this kind of company. You work here in Hungary. All the people here are good. All the leader here are good. But if you are in the Philippines, if you don't call all the leaders 'Sir' and 'ma'am'… Maybe after one day you don't have work."

Matthew, 36

It is impossible to know whether the negative judgement of these Ukrainian colleagues would have happened were they not in a work-related situation, or if these Ukrainians would have showed humility and respect towards the leaders. His concepts of who deserves to be in the privileges position to work in a factory in Europe are based on an imaginary where one has to value their position. Interestingly, this was the harshest comment on other nationalities[16], and it came from the person who was the most vocal about workers' rights.

He continued with emphasising the exceptionally good ties, friendship between the Philippines and Hungary, he saw the strengthening of the statal ties as an outcome of Filipinos' exceptional work capabilities:

"This country wants 10,000 Filipinos a year. Yes. Then that's why there's another Filipino now here in Hungary, (…) because they know how the Filipinos work. We always work good, right? That's why they like all the Filipinos. That's why there's a lot of companies here like Filipino people. We are not Ukrainian. We are hardworking."

Matthew, 36

[16] Romani people were mentioned in all except for one interview, without me bringing them up. Their depiction varied from neutral to negative. Both Ukrainians and Hungarians were described by Orfeo and Jonathan as 'short tempered'. It has to kept in mind, that me being Hungarian perhaps stopped them from expressing further critiques on Hungarian colleagues or leaders.

Chickenry, where Brando used to work at, established significant ties with Vietnam. The factory only by employed Vietnamese people, but by also built a production site there. When asked about whether Brando has any Vietnamese colleagues, he first explained their asence by the productive work-ethic of Filipinos:

> “They [Chickenry] pull out all the Vietnamese, then they put Filipinos, little Filipinos, maybe a bunch of 20 or 10 Filipinos. They like the hard worker, as Filipinos who work hard. That's right. Filipinos are very hardworking people and very honest. Very hard working and honest people.”
>
> Brando, 35

Interestingly, the religious and cultural reasonings for the desirability of Filipinos were mentioned even at governmental discussions:

> "Whenever we were in events with the Foreign Ministry or whatever office always on the Hungarian side, rhetorically they would be pointing out that Filipino workers are very welcome to in Hungary because we share the same tradition, we share the same values.."
>
> Embassy

The interviewee from the Embassy added, that upon discussing the warm welcoming tones of the Hungarian government with colleagues from embassies representing potential labour-power sending countries, they did not experience the rhetorical highlighting of cultural, religious similarities between their countries and Hungary.

From these excerpts the state's and firms' practice of economic appropriation of these workers via cultural essentialisation is apparent, while the ethnicised or culturalized view of Filipinos on the state level rhetorically legitimises their selective import, in contrast to other nationalities. On the other hand, the productivity-myth attributed to Asian culture has been internalised by some interviewees, and has been used as a way of bearing with hard circumstances. The culturalized self-depictions can assumably serve as grounds to build deservingness on, against persons not belonging to the imaginary of productive or humble groups.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I positioned the presence and selective allowing of Filippino guestworkers into the tensions between state and market, in the semi-peripheral location of Hungary. In the first section I positioned the topic within the literature studying the authoritarian responses and alternatives given to neoliberalism in regimes where nationalism is the prominent leading ideology (Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019, Szombati 2020, Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2020). I connected it with literature studying the ethnic and national differences present at labour markets, arguing that while Filipino guest workers' presence is legitimised via magnified imagined cultural and religious similarities between the two countries, yet their labour market positionality remains secondary, compared to domestic labourers, for instance.

In the second chapter I presented how the geopolitical processes of the 2010s have strengthened the need for labour power, which by the middle of the 2010s have become an acute problem, which proved to be unresolvable with via third country nationals from the neighbouring countries. Simultaneously, as a way of tapping in to an economic decline, nationalist ideologies gained a stronghold with the second victory of FIDESZ. In 2015 the political propaganda capitalised on the arrival of refugees, which turned out to define the next decade's political rhetoric, exacerbating strong xenophobic sentiments in the public – with which the gradually increasing appearance of third country nationals was in sharp contrast.

With the legislative changes of the end of 2024, the number of eligible sending countries has been limited, and regarding the South-East Asian sending region, only the Philippines qualified to squeeze through the legislative loophole. The thesis suggests that the inclusionary treatment the Philippines have experienced from the Hungarian government's side is not mere coincidence, but part of a selective mechanism answering to the market demands, while nationalist discourses are

also attended to.

As for the empirical and data analysis of the thesis, I studied the real life experiences, work conditions, and self-perceptions of the selectively included Filippino migrant workers deployed in the car manufacturing sector and one in the food industry. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five overseas Filippino workers, the personnel of the Philippine Embassy in Budapest and its Labor Office, the vice-president of a labour union federation and a labour power lending agency. The latter two are integrated into the thesis indirectly, while the quotations are from the former seven interviewees. The number of worker interviews excludes the possibility of generalisations, while allowing for drawing implications. I analysed the interviews from the perspectives of labour conditions and relations, migration processes and the responsibility-locations different actors dispose of, and from the perspective of cultural identities covering economic motives.

Supporting, and perhaps complementing some findings of Meszmann and Fedyuk (2016) and Bodor (2024) the first chapter of the interview analyses of the thesis suggest that in some cases slave-like treatment, inhumane work conditions, illegality give grounds for the appreciation of minimum standards characteristic of their employment in Hungary, those who experienced downward occupational mobility, are part of the segmented labour market's attempt to save labour costs for the employer. The unpredictable future and institutionalised non-belonging inflicted upon them by market-state interests further reinforce the precarious character of their lives. Precarity manifests itself via the instable and uncertain presence and future they face, the heightened exposedness to and dependence on employers, temporary and recruitment agencies who tend to shift responsibility onto the employed.

In the second chapter of the analysis I measured the length of some meso-level institutional actors' possibility and willingness of helping the workers they are responsible for. Within the migration

process, official state- and meso-level actors are set in place to facilitate the process of labour migration, yet abuse and illegality even, are not out of the ordinary. With the fragmentation of not only production, but the supply of labour power import, responsibility is gradually outsourced, often burdening the workers themselves, similar to the findings of Meszmann and Fedyuk (2016) in relation to Ukrainian migrant workers. The lack of institutional help allows for the emergence of informal migration networks where information is promoted and help is offered, in a way countering neoliberal perceptions of individual responsibility with informal networks. The thesis finds similar implications as Messzman and Fedyuk (2016) did with regards to the practices of temporary and recruitment agencies' tendencies of exerting control over their employees and shifting responsibility onto them in the specific story of Unable. Kft. While there are developments and attempts at trying to secure their journey's safety, it is still facilitated by actors that often fragment and outsource responsibility.

In the third chapter I return to the culturalist selectiveness of the Hungarian government in a way returning: some aspects of national identity surfaced in the worker interviews as well, and they fit into the narrative which detaches 'cultural' characteristics of one's identity from their economic reality (Tsing 2009), thus either contributing or resisting hardships from the perspective of national/ethnic belonging. In this context the Hungarian workfarist regime took advantage of the Asian stereotype of the 'productive' and 'good' worker, and reasoned the approval of Filipinos' migrant workers' inclusion in the labour force with religious values. The stereotypes repeated on the meso-level[17] have occasionally been translated in an essentialising manner by the micro-level actors. Correlation between these levels is of course way beyond the scope of this work.

[17] The way temporary agencies 'brand' and try to marketise certain migrant labourers correspond to this suggestion as well. In their work Meszmann and Fedyuk also found similar patterns.

Nonetheless, the interviews implied that through internalising certain values associated with their national identity, they do construct themselves accordingly, as the 'good Filipino' worker. Some workers conceptualised deservingness in the same veins, against other nationalities. Overall, the recent strengthening of Filipino migrant workers in Hungary seems to be justified with culturalist reasons, which surfaced in workers' imaginary of the social too. Their construction of deservingness is built in against the previous experiences of extreme precarity and exploitation, while their inclusionary policies from the Hungarian government's side tap into the 'naturalised' productivity.

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