Home State Ideologies and the Cultivation of Diaspora Subjectivity amongst Hungarian and Venezuelan Migrants in London

Judit Molnár
School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography
St John's College
University of Oxford

Primary supervisor: Dr Dace Dzenovska
Secondary supervisor: Dr Emmanouil Pratsinakis

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the factors that shape diasporic subjectivities amongst Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants in London through comparative ethnography. It approaches homewards orientation as shaped both in relation to state-based narratives, moralities, and policies proposed by two divergent autocratic regimes – Hungary's nationalism and Venezuela's socialism – as well as non-state-based aspects such as relations to kin and community. It asks how nationals abroad (dis)engage with their home states and what kinds of transnational lives emerge in the process.

Over the past two decades, Hungary and Venezuela experienced significant outmigration from their territories, to which their responses have remarkably differed. Hungary, after initial moral reckoning, treats its emigrants as integral to the nation, institutionalising one of Europe's most comprehensive diaspora engagement strategies. In contrast, the Venezuelan state frames emigration, particularly 'westward', as an act of betrayal and systematically hinders migrants' political and humanitarian involvement in Venezuela. Notwithstanding, both states also operate based on the principles of 'ideological citizenship', empowering those aligned with their political ideologies transnationally and precluding those who are not.

Through this dissertation, I illustrate that migrants are not merely objects of the state, and diaspora policies often have discordant results as, through their acts, migrants loosen and reassemble the respective states' citizenship articulations. Home state ideologies are key to migrant trajectories as they shape visions of successful migration, coping strategies, and prompt a critique of the host country. However, rooted in the prevalent perception of having been failed by the state, migration often becomes a site

of contesting the home state's claims. Yet, the home country also emerges as the container of kin and personal networks, which complicates determinations to (dis)engage. I argue that with migration, the state's capacity to impart control significantly lessens and while home states influence homewards orientation, they do not structure it. This work is a contribution to understanding migrants' responses to states consolidating power through cross-border connectedness in an era of proliferating autocratic regimes and as such, is fundamental to devising more resilient democratic trajectories.

Acknowledgements

There is a photo of seven-year-old me, standing in front of an iconic gateway in Oxford, wearing a colourful top my mother had sewn by hand. For years, anyone who saw this picture would unfailingly remark that I was destined to study here. To me, however, it has always symbolised something different: the unconditional love and countless sacrifices of my parents, which made it possible for me to get where I am today.

I was born in the final years of socialism in Hungary, with its legacy shaping my early life. Yet my world was surprisingly international. I was the kid who was always surrounded by foreigners. Though our resources were limited, my parents saved every forint they could to take me travelling every year. They gave me an exceptional start in life and have remained my greatest cheerleaders ever since. I could not be more grateful for everything they have done for me, and I can only hope that I have made them proud.

Unfortunately, I lost both of my grandmothers during my time at Oxford, but their encouragement – along with that of my grandfather and aunt – had been and continues to be an important pillar.

Although acknowledgements are usually dedicated to people, I feel compelled to recognise two processes that profoundly shaped my academic future: Hungary's accession to the European Union and the invention of Couchsurfing. Having completed three Erasmus exchanges and an Erasmus Mundus joint degree, the EU came to represent the academic support and recognition that my own country denied me. Couchsurfing, meanwhile, made me an anthropologist long before I knew the discipline existed. Hosting and staying with more than 200 people from New Zealand to Brunei,

Turkey to Mexico gave me extraordinary insights into the everyday lives of people around the world.

The most decisive moment from the perspective of this dissertation, however, had to wait until 2013. At the time, I was pursuing a Master's degree in Cultural Studies at the University of St Andrews, a field in which I never fully felt at home. Thus, when a newsletter advertised last-minute spaces on evening courses, it reminded me of my supervisor's comment that Anthropology might be a better fit for me.

During the very first session, Chris Hewlett – a final-year PhD student at the time – described his two years of fieldwork in the Amazon rainforest. I sat, jaw dropped, as clarity swept over me. In that moment, everything had suddenly made sense. Ideas raced through my mind, and by the end of class I knew: I wanted to become an anthropologist.

In the months that followed, Chris offered me invaluable insights, encouragement, and support. Our twelve-minute walks back to graduate accommodation, during which he let me ask all the questions I had burning inside of me, soon became the highlight of my week. He may not even remember me today, but no anthropological work I write could ever be complete without thanking him for setting me on this path. Today, every time I stand in front of a class, it is in the hope that I can pass on the spark that Chris gave me that day.

The next step was to train myself as the anthropologist I aspired to be. I successfully applied for a scholarship at the State University of Yogyakarta to study Indonesian Language and Culture, as part of which I spent a month among the Toraja tribe studying

their funeral practices. The community's generous welcome confirmed that Anthropology was indeed my discipline, for which I remain grateful to this day.

At the time, I imagined a future as an anthropologist of Indonesia and enrolled in the Anthropology programme at the University of Vienna with this goal. It was 2015, with the so-called 'refugee crisis' unfolding in front of our eyes in Central Europe and accordingly, many of the courses on offer reflected the urgency of the moment. I randomly signed up for one and within two weeks, it was clear: paired with Anthropology, I had found another calling: migration. I owe thanks to my former supervisor, Prof Ayşe Çağlar, for encouraging me to pursue the topic and insisting that I take it onto a PhD.

My road to doctoral research was not without hurdles, however. I applied to Cambridge, the only university I had initially considered, for two consecutive years and was rejected both times. Today, I am grateful for those rejections, as they led me to the most intellectually supportive environment I could ever have imagined at Oxford.

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knowledge I admire and whose academic judgment I trust without hesitation, and it is genuinely daunting to imagine continuing my journey in academia without her by my side.

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To the rest of the Anthropology Society team – Ari, Emmanuele, Andrés, Tristan, and Tsovinar – thank you for your friendship, commitment, and the joy you brought to our project. We built something truly special together.

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This work would not have been possible without the generous financial support I received. I thank the Economic and Social Research Council for funding my tuition and providing resources that opened doors to invaluable opportunities – including my internship with IOM and participation in numerous workshops and conferences.

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Preface

I will never forget my last walk before the lockdown, dancing down the streets of Córdoba, Argentina, in a cloud of euphoria. I had just been accepted for a DPhil at Oxford with plans to study Hungarian diaspora engagement in the context of Brexit, and the looming pandemic felt like a minor footnote in my thrilling plans. Little did I know that when I shut the ornate iron gate of my AirBnB, surrendering myself to months of quarantine, I was closing myself in on a pandemic story that would fundamentally reshape my doctoral plans.

My spacious studio in the suburbs of the city, where I had arrived a few days prior to take up a job as a diaspora facilitator for the Hungarian state, was attached to an older house, my only connection to the outside world for the next months. The owner of the house, a Paraguayan lady who was living her second life after surviving a devastating disease, had transformed her home into a spiritual refuge, offering rooms to those in need: recently divorced locals, temporarily unemployed foreigners, and two Venezuelan half-brothers. They were the first I knew about: familiar with the Venezuelan crisis, when the head of the Hungarian community checked the house before my arrival, she noted that I would be sharing a wall with two Venezuelan 'refugees' and asked if I would be OK. Little did she know that one of them grew up hearing stories about his father – whom he had never met – being half-Hungarian.

Three weeks passed before I first met J. I was in the middle of preparing an elaborate meal in the shared kitchen when he appeared to make his daily cafecito, a ritual he had brought with himself from Venezuela. At the time, I was just getting acquainted with irregular verbs in Spanish while his English was rudimentary. As he explained, I was the

first person he had ever met who was not a native speaker of Spanish. Our improvised language tandem felt almost inevitable. We were fascinated by each other's words and worlds and each new phrase we taught each other fuelled our friendship further and further.

Like me, J. dreamt of becoming an academic. However, boarding the first of a dozen buses that carried him from his hometown in the Andes to Córdoba meant leaving behind six years of higher education and his dream of turning into a scholar of Architecture. Amidst the political chaos that extended corruption to his university, he had lost all hope of retrieving his academic transcripts. His inability to build in the classroom soon turned into the cruel symbol of the restrictions placed on his capacity to construct his life anew. Nonetheless, he chose Argentina in the hope of availing of free education to re-enrol in the programme he loved.

Only, he couldn't. Establishing himself in the new country proved to be an arduous journey and just as he began to feel comfortable, his room was burgled and his laptop stolen. Soon, it also became a priority to bring his brother over, a costly process that consumed all his savings.

As the days of the lockdown dragged on, I was forced to conduct my work with the Hungarian community online, often roaming the house in search of stable Wi-Fi, leaving my flatmates with no choice but to listen in to my classes. Snippets of nationalism transmitted through Zoom kept J. perplexed: why was the Hungarian state so invested in the descendants of migrants who left generations ago, if Venezuela punished its own citizens fleeing destitution? I felt ashamed to say that despite having studied migration for years, I could not make sense of it either.

Soon enough, J. became intimately familiar with Hungary's zealous diaspora engagement policies as well. I watched day after day as he kept devouring books and I felt almost embarrassed that it was me going to Oxford, not him. I was convinced that somebody like him needed to be given a chance, and it soon became my obsession to help him escape an Argentina that seemed to be spiralling towards the same fate as the Venezuela he had fled. Trying to collect all the documents and stories we could around his father, I encouraged him to apply for a five-year diaspora scholarship based on his Hungarian roots.

I cannot describe the feeling of seeing him waiting for me at the train station in Hungary to spend the day being shown his new reality. Everything seemed to be falling into place, and I was ecstatic that for the first time in my life, I had made a real difference.

Our connection could be called anything but smooth. Plagued by the trauma that the Venezuelan state handed out more generously than its infamous CLAP boxes, J. was trying to stay afloat despite friends of his in Venezuela dying due to the lack of medical supplies and others getting caught by the border patrol on their clandestine journeys to the US. He had not seen his mother for almost a decade. However, I believed that after what we had achieved, we would overcome anything.

On Christmas Day 2023, without any warning, J. cut all contact. The act shook not only me but also my family, who had all been deeply invested in helping him feel at home in Hungary. I will never know what happened. On good days, I attribute his silence to his burning desire to cut with his crippling past and start on a blank page. On bad days, I obsess over what I have done wrong. On worse days, I feel blinded by anger and disappointment.

I still cannot make sense of our story. But knowing him has helped me better understand the stories of many others, from his country and mine, whose lives have been fractured by their home states, yet who remain deeply entangled in intricate ties to it, wherever they are.

This dissertation is dedicated to them – and to us.

Introduction

Background

"We're thinking of trying to collaborate with the Venezuelan government" – said Alejandra, her tone cautious yet hopeful, her eyes searching mine for approval. The optimism in her voice caught me off guard. When, as part of my ethnographic involvement with VeneHelp, I was invited to support a joint project between the group and the UN's International Organization for Migration to help coordinate humanitarian efforts, one condition was clear: politics would be kept out. Local representatives defined this clause as non-negotiable, citing frustration with Venezuelan politics and insisting that any perceived alignment with the government would undermine their credibility. Alejandra herself had argued how damaging political alignment could be, particularly in their dealings with international partners. And yet, here she was, suggesting the unthinkable.

"But that would compromise your independence, which is so central to everything you are doing now." – I replied, more startled than I had intended. Having focused on the Hungarian state's diaspora engagement since 2015, I was familiar with the dangers inherent to her suggestion. Under Viktor Orbán's government, a large-scale diaspora policy had been devised, proposing to draw migrant organisations into a state-aligned network. Monetary rewards were extended to associations willing to take on affiliated status, 'Return Home Offices' established, and facilitators dispatched around the world to organise Hungarian communities, strengthen national identity, and promote ties to the home country. Beyond reshaping the institutional structure of Hungarian diaspora life,

the state's involvement shifted organically evolving connectedness towards an increasingly scripted participation.

Nonetheless, I empathised with Alejandra's concern. *"Change is impossible without negotiation."* – she argued. *"We have to learn how to work within the system that has been created. If all elections are manipulated, how are you going to go about trying to achieve change in any other way?"* Since Venezuela's political, economic, and humanitarian crisis began, the Venezuelan state has systematically obstructed westbound migrants from staying invested in their home country. Labelling them as traitors, their humanitarian efforts have been rejected and their voices silenced.

While Alejandra's proposal was never raised again, the dilemma it posed lingered, pointing to a persistent tension: migrants desiring to contribute meaningfully but aiming to stay away from the politics that precipitated the mass exodus. I started wondering if it is ever truly an option to bypass the state and focus solely on country and compatriots, or if these entities are so inextricably intertwined that they resist separation. This question sits at the heart of my dissertation, in which I explore how migrants navigate the diaspora policies tailored by the divergent political regimes, whereby home states claim the authority to determine the terms of national belonging and legitimate participation.

First-generation Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants currently in London arrived around the same time albeit in different numbers and aided by different citizenship rights. Large-scale Hungarian migration to the UK dates back to the 1956 revolution against Soviet occupation, which resulted in the settlement of 20,990 refugees in the country (Zieck, 2013). While these early migrants became largely assimilated in line

with the integrationist expectations of the era (Levitt, 2001), some of the most important Hungarian cultural centres were established during this period. According to the UN Population Division (2025), 538,794 Hungarians were outside their country in 2024. KSH (2025) reports 367,515 leaving in the past 15 years. From 2004, they availed of mobility rights as EU citizens, with the United Kingdom emerging as one of their top four destinations alongside Austria, Germany, and the United States (Papp, Kovács and Kovács, 2025). Despite earlier underestimates due to the difficulties of measuring intra-EU movement, with the Hungarian government estimating 80,000 Hungarians in the UK in 2016 (Hungarian Diaspora Politics, 2016), and the Office for National Statistics placing the number at 98,000 in 2019, by 2025, the UK Home Office recorded 196,750 applications for the EU settlement scheme from Hungarians (Gov.uk, 2025). Roughly half of them reside in London, which prompted Gordon Bajnai, former Prime Minister representing the Hungarian Socialist Party to claim that London boasts the third largest Hungarian population after Budapest and Debrecen (444.hu, 2015).

Initially, post-accession emigration from Hungary was driven primarily by economic factors. Ágnes Hárs (2016) notes that relative to the region, Hungary experienced delayed outmigration, with no significant wave forming until the late 2000s, with Katalin Bodnár and Lajos Szabó (2014) identifying the 2007-08 financial crisis as the initial trigger. Nonetheless, as Steven Vertovec (2023) observes, migration to multicultural cities like London increasingly reflects mixed motivations, an observation frequently underscored with regards to Eastern European migrants in the UK (Lulle, Morosanu, and King, 2018; Cook, Dwyer and Waite, 2010). While the label of ‘economic migration’ remains, amongst Hungarians, political dissatisfaction as a push factor has become increasingly salient. Chris Moreh (2014) called attention to the

growing political undertones of Hungarian emigration in the mid-2010s, arguing that "while the economic crisis is acknowledged in the narratives […] as a major cause of their economic hardships, many migrants perceive 'politics' – or political corruption – as the main culprit" (p. 94). Similarly, András Bíró-Nagy and Andrea Szabó (2021) note that political changes unfolding since 2010 have boosted youth emigration, with the number of emigrants in 2012 being 2.5 times that of 2010, the year Fidesz came to power. According to András Kováts and Attila Papp Z. (2016), 47% of Hungarian emigrants cited political discontent as at least partially motivating their leave. Furthermore, Ivett Bernadett Rácz (2018) emphasises that while Hungarians might have emigrated for economic reasons, the decision to remain post-Brexit had more to do with disillusionment over Hungarian politics than conditions in Britain. The political nature of migratory decisions has intensified in recent years amidst the expulsion of the liberal Central European University, insistent reproductive campaigns, and restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights.

Migration from Hungary has mostly occurred through a direct trajectory. Amongst potential host countries, Hungarians have traditionally perceived the UK as a place of intellectual fulfilment and career opportunities, contributing to what Imola Józsa and Sergey Vinogradov (2017) describe as the concentration of over-qualified Hungarians in the United Kingdom. Less educated individuals have often migrated with temporary intentions. Although Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic slowed outmigration and prompted significant return amongst the latter group, highly educated migrants opted to stay more dominantly (Ligeti, 2021). As a result, the UK continues to benefit from Hungary's 'brain drain' (Boros *et al.* 2013; Nadler, Kovács, and Glorius, 2016), even if migrants are often employed below their qualification levels (Laczik, 2014).

In contrast, Venezuela has shifted from a country receiving immigrants to a major source of emigration. Between 1950 and 1990, it consistently maintained a positive net migration rate (UN Population Database, 2013 in Soltész, 2017), only entering the negative realms post-2005. Since 2010, the complex political, economic, and humanitarian crisis has resulted in massive outflows of people (Dekocker, 2018; HRW, 2019; Gandini, Ascencio, and Rosas, 2019) and the sanctions and international economic blockade imposed from 2019 deepened the crisis even further (CELAG, 2021), rendering it internationally constituted. Today, 91% of Venezuelans live in poverty, and 67% in extreme poverty (Wilson Center, 2024), with access to basic services severely limited. An Organization of American States report predicted that by the end of 2021, the number of Venezuelans in exodus would exceed the number of Syrian refugees despite the humanitarian aid allocated to Venezuelans being less than a tenth of the amount received by Syrians (in Baddour, 2019). According to IOM (2025), more than 7.89 million Venezuelans were outside Venezuela as of December 2024. This represents the second-largest displacement after Sudan's worldwide (WorldVision, 2025). Nonetheless, those who have left contribute substantially to Venezuela's economy through remittances, which rose from $2.4 billion in 2018 to $4.2 billion in 2022, constituting 5% of GDP in 2022 (The Dialogue, 2022).

Venezuelan outmigration has occurred in two distinct waves (Osorio Álvarez and Phélan C., 2020). The first period, which lasted until the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013 coincided with an oil boom that boosted national revenues, but was also characterised by demonstrations and widespread instability, prompting many international companies to exit the country. Fears over nationalization, expropriation, and the impact of extensive political and economic reforms on individuals' rights led many highly skilled

professionals to seek better opportunities outside Venezuela. This wave was predominantly characterised by a South to North extra-regional migration, with emigrants being in possession of satisfactory economic means to move towards developed countries. According to Tomás Páez (2015), about 94% of those migrating during this period were college graduates, many of European descent who held dual citizenship. While significant in shaping emigration patterns, this wave only comprised 14% of the total exodus. From the perspective of this dissertation, nonetheless, this wave is of particular importance since it saw the arrival of the majority of my participants and it challenges the prevailing image of Venezuelans as impoverished individuals fleeing for survival.

The second, post-2013 wave was characterised by economic scarcity, repression, and humanitarian collapse, which resulted in an increase of annual emigration from 120,000 pre-2015 to over 1.1 million post-2016 (Páez and Phélan, 2018). According to Datincorp, 25% of migrants who left during this period cited political hopelessness as a factor (in Cañizález, 2018). This wave is marked by the emigration of highly vulnerable people who relied on limited resources and sought asylum predominantly in neighbouring countries, where the rapid rise in migrant numbers provoked growing xenophobia (Freier and Pérez, 2021; OXFAM, 2019).

Venezuelan migrants have arrived in the UK through various legal channels. The majority of those currently in the country hold EU citizenship due to ancestry (Páez, 2021), which enables them to avail of mobility and employment rights similar to Hungarians. Many of these people settled in the counties corresponding to their citizenship first, most typically Spain, Portugal, and Italy, and subsequently relocated to

the UK pre-Brexit in search of better economic conditions. Others, especially those migrating post-Brexit, relied on family reunification or work permits or overstayed tourist visas (Román-Velázquez and Retis, 2021).

Due to the particular nature of these pathways, Venezuelans are often underrepresented in official statistics. The 2011 census recorded 8,385 Venezuelans living in England and Wales (Román-Velázquez and Retis, 2021). However, with UNHCR (2021) quoting an 8,000% increase in the number of Venezuelan migrants worldwide since 2014, this number is presumably significantly higher today. According to the estimates of Páez, the number of people holding a Venezuelan identity document in the UK might have reached 30,000 by 2017 (Financial Times, 2017). Return migration among Venezuelans has been negligible, although there is a limited degree of onward migration within Europe and to other developed countries.

These patterns have shaped two communities of distinct socio-economic constitution. Hungarian migrants in the UK tend to occupy a middle-class position, with 84.3% of working-age Hungarians being in employment between 2013-15, which exceeds both EU8 and UK-born averages (Office for National Statistics, 2017). By 2024, EU-born workers, including Hungarians, had a mean income of £31,100, earning somewhat higher wages than British or non-EU citizens (Strain-Fajth and Sumption, 2025). Hungarian employees are mainly employed in hospitality, construction, healthcare, and manufacturing and initial occupational downgrading remains common. A notable exception is Hungarian students pursuing higher education in the UK, who often acquire well-remunerated positions and form a distinct upwardly mobile subgroup within the Hungarian migrant community.

By contrast, Venezuelans in the UK show more significant internal stratification. In general, the earlier one migrated, the better they managed to preserve their socioeconomic status, with Venezuelans who left during the first migration wave constituting an influential elite in London. As one participant noted: *"They are very 'hechónes'* [boastful, full of themselves]. *The Venezuelans who came here, who arrived here, are the well-educated ones, from a relatively high social class – more or less –, and they are very well-educated. That's the kind of Venezuelan who is here. So the way they present themselves is by saying, 'I am this, I am that, and the other' and you immediately understand."* Conversely, later arrivals frequently face class demotion. These individuals, whose migration tends to be facilitated by kin, often work in low-paid, informal sectors such as hospitality, cleaning, or delivery. Degree recognition issues exacerbate downward mobility and similarly to Hungarians, educated Venezuelans often take on jobs below their qualifications.

Hungary and Venezuela offer two ideologically contrasting case studies, grounded in far-right nationalism and far-left socialism[1] respectively and in line with these political ideologies, exhibit markedly different approaches to their diasporas. The Venezuelan state's engagement with its emigrant population has been minimal and selective. The Maduro government's 'Plan Vuelta a la Patria' [Return to the Homeland Plan], initiated in 2018, aimed to aid those whose migration projects in neighbouring countries failed by repatriating them and placing them in the social protection system of Venezuela. Nevertheless, with only 29,124 people (approximately 0.5% of the diaspora) repatriated by 2022 almost exclusively from Latin American countries (Gestión, 2022), the scheme

[1] While 'far-left socialism' is not a universally recognised term, I use it as a synonym of 'radical socialism' to highlight its convergence with the far-right in terms of autocratic tendencies, hostility to liberal democratic norms, and reliance on a state-centric, exclusionary model of political governance.

remains limited both in terms of scope and geographical reach. According to the socialist discourse, those who emigrate to ‘the West’ are traitors and their attempts to reconnect with their homeland should be obstructed. The opposition-led ‘Vuelve a Casa’ [Return Home] scheme promoted patriotic return rhetorically, aiming to mobilise liberal-leaning emigrants for the future reconstruction of Venezuela. However, it lacked material support and consistent follow-through and ultimately, stayed more of an aspirational framework than an actionable plan (Padilla and López Maya, 2021; Páez, 2021).

Thus, much of the work around keeping Venezuelans united and initiating dialogue with the home-state is carried out by organically emerging diaspora groups, often developing out of the social networks involved in migration. As Beatriz Padilla and Magdalena López Maya (2021) note, members of the diaspora have inevitably connected over the shared experience of violence, corruption, resource scarcity, and the erosion of the rule of law in Venezuela because, as Páez (2021) emphasises, collective effort was needed to overcome the trauma suffered. These diaspora groups have served not only as mutual aid networks but as actors engaged in humanitarian assistance, public diplomacy, and cultural preservation (Bravo, 2014; Bravo and De Moya, 2015; Orozco, 2020) and in the absence of functional embassies, have filled the vacuum left by the state (Páez, 2021). Although most such associations operate independently, a notable parallel phenomenon has been the proliferation of groups aligned with Chavism, which leverage state support to shape public discourse and lobby internationally.

In contrast, after a period of moral reckoning, since Viktor Orbán’s ascent to power, Hungary’s diaspora construction has been spearheaded by the state to communicate that

emigrants remain an inherent part of the nation. Since 2013, the Kőrösi Programme, the Hungarian state's flagship initiative has dispatched facilitators to around 140 locations in more than 30 countries worldwide with the aim of organising the Hungarian community, teaching the language, offering cultural events, encouraging citizenship applications, and in the process, emphasising co-responsibility between the state and its emigrants. By offering existing cultural organisations membership in a diaspora network that spans the globe and reinforcing commitments through generous funding, the Hungarian government transformed scattered communities into a cohesive network. In the first phase of its existence, Hungarian diaspora engagement focused on the goal of enhancing return. However, around 2017, the Hungarian state recognised the advantages of keeping migrants where they are and harnessing their skills, networks, and resources across borders (Molnár, 2018).

In the 'superdiverse' (Vertovec, 2007) city of London, where over 40% of the population is foreign-born (Cuibus, 2024), transnational connectedness is a defining feature of everyday life, with liberal values and democratic governance long associated with the city's cosmopolitan identity and its appeal as a migration destination (Kováts and Papp Z., 2016; Páez, 2015). However, the UK's decision to exit the EU – partially driven by the aim of reclaiming sovereignty and curbing immigration – has unsettled this perception. Manolis Pratsinakis *et al.* (2020) argue that with Brexit, the 'taken-for-grantedness' of certain rights and privileges pertinent to EU membership came to be eradicated, which led to migrants' alienation (also in Lulle, Morosanu, and King, 2018; Mazzilli and King, 2018).

Brexit's illiberal turn also echoed characteristics of the regimes left behind. In 2013, Elizabeth Collett still emphasised that European Union citizens relying on privileges of free movement should not be considered migrants, but mobile citizens, a denomination which comes with near-native level rights, in the Brexit process, this label has lost its meaning. Government initiatives such as the 'Get help to return home if you're a migrant in the UK' offering financial aid for EU citizens who opted to return sent an ambiguous message. The experience of betrayal was particularly acute amongst Hungarians, who, as Jon E. Fox, Laura Moroşanu and Eszter Szilassy (2012) note, often relied on their 'white European' identity to assert belonging when faced with exclusionary behaviour in the UK. The ultra-right Jobbik party had gained ground in London immediately preceding Brexit (e.g. The Guardian, 2014), but gradually dissolved during the Brexit process, with many of its members presumably repatriating to Hungary.

While the xenophobic sentiment accompanying Brexit was predominantly directed at Eastern Europeans, the Latin American community suffered comparable marginalization. The impact of gentrification on migrant livelihoods was felt most acutely through the demolition of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, a longstanding hub of the Latin American community (Román-Velázquez and Retis, 2021). As Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron (2001) highlight, enduring discrimination might reinforce migrants' attachment to their national identities and encourage renewed engagement with their places of origin. This climate provided a fertile ground for home states to reassert connectedness with their emigrant population and in the Hungarian context, gave birth to the 'Gyere Haza Fiatal' [Come Back Home Young Person] scheme, specifically targeting UK-based Hungarians.

Hungary positions its emigrants as integral to a global 'nation-empire', a transnationally implemented nationalist project. Venezuela, by contrast, maintains an antagonistic stance, framing emigrants as political enemies. Despite divergent approaches by the state, migrants in both groups have found ways to assert agency and contest, negotiate, or selectively engage with what it proposes. This dissertation examines how the disparate claims made by the two states shape different forms of diaspora subjectivity. It asks how crucial the ideological divide between left and right is in explaining differences, and what additional factors, whether structural, personal, historical, or cultural impact these dynamics and how. By exploring the intersections of political ideology, diaspora policy, and migrant agency, my study offers a unique contribution to understanding what role nation-states continue to play in an era defined by globalisation, transnationalism, and mobility.

On comparison

Throughout the dominant part of my doctoral research, no matter whether I introduced my project at an academic conference or a dinner party, the inopportune question of 'why these two groups' consistently followed me around. The query, often posed with a tone of scepticism, reflected a widespread stance that comparing Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants was akin to comparing apples and oranges. Critics argued that the two groups' migration experiences fundamentally differed: Hungarians moved primarily for economic reasons, exercising their right to mobility as EU citizens while Venezuelans were fleeing a collapsed state. The assumption followed that such

divergent trajectories undermined the possibility of meaningful comparison, which, by extension, cast doubt on the validity of my project.

Initially, I found the argument destabilising. It provoked anxiety and self-doubt, responses that only exacerbated my struggle to articulate a clear justification for my project. At the same time, I kept being inspired by ethnographies that used bold and unconventional comparisons to reveal important insights. One such work was ‘Georges Woke Up Laughing’ (2001) by Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron, which compares contemporary Haitian migration to the United States and the historical experiences of Polish and Russian immigrants. For me, Glick Schiller and Fouron’s work challenged the idea that comparison must rest on obvious symmetry or emerge from immediate clarity.

I kept pondering one question throughout: if anthropology is a discipline committed to understanding the human condition in all its variety and complexity, then should it not embrace comparison instead of merely tolerating it? This section provides a reflection on how I came to conceptualise the comparative method in my research. It discusses the epistemological tension surrounding comparison in Anthropology; my own evolving approach; and the ethical and practical considerations that shaped the comparative dimensions of my work. In turn, my subsequent ‘Methodology’ chapter provides insights into how I applied comparison in practice. While fraught with challenges, I argue that if approached prudently, comparative research can provide a valuable lens for identifying patterns, developing theory, and fostering a reflexive mode of inquiry.

Despite being at the heart of its inquiry, Anthropology has long experienced an ambivalent relationship with comparison. As Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1966)

famously remarked, “There is only one method in social anthropology – the comparative method – and that’s impossible.” (in Candea, 2019, p. 1). Much of this inconsistency stems from the discipline’s origins in 19th-century cultural evolutionism, within which framework scholars sought to place societies along a unilinear hierarchy of development. These early comparative projects were steeped in ethnocentrism and colonialism to emphasise the superiority of Western societies, which soon led to resistance from within. Franz Boas, a proponent of cultural relativism, argued that every culture had to be understood in its unique particularity and took a firm stance against the comparative approach, setting “a tone for what would become a tradition of comparative-anthropology bashing” (Tobin, 1990, p. 477).

The rejection of explicit forms of comparison did not mean that anthropologists stopped comparing as indeed, without comparative reference points, cultural analysis would merely be about describing and interpreting (HRAF, 2019). Peter van der Veer (2016) argues that rejecting evolutionism must not mean rejecting comparison: rather, it should caution against overgeneralization. He further contends that with Anthropology being primarily concerned with difference and diversity, recognition of the centrality of cultural translation across sociocultural contexts is key, which inherently invites comparison. Clifford Geertz (1988) observed that Ruth Benedict’s studies of the Kwakiutl, Zuni, and Japanese were a ‘negative-space writing’ implicitly contrasting their reality with Western patterns. Moreover, as Carol R. Ember (2016) emphasises, even stating that a group is unique is suggesting that it differs from all other known cases and as such, is the result of comparison. Matei Candea (2019) underlines that comparison never disappeared from the discipline, but critical engagement with its

epistemological foundations was sidelined, leading to a methodological vacuum in which comparison was often conducted unreflectively.

As Candea (2019) argues, the debate is not about the value of comparison, but the need to acknowledge it as fundamental cognitive activity and find a consensus on how to use it meaningfully. As Guy E. Swanson (1971) succinctly summarised, “Thinking without comparison is unthinkable.” (p. 145). Candea proposes a focus on three analytical operations that underpin comparative work: identifying sameness and difference, tracing patterns and relations, and balancing objectivity with reflexivity and distinguishes two major ways of undertaking comparison. Frontal comparison entails a direct, ‘head-to-head’ juxtaposition of social phenomena relying on shared metrics. Lateral comparison, by contrast, starts by understanding each case separately before identifying shared themes, which resonates more closely with Anthropology’s focus on context, complexity, and meaning making. However, such a division is problematic as it presupposes the existence of pure groups in their own contexts. Gillian Hart’s (2018) concept of ‘relational comparison’ is valuable here: it interprets humans “as always already interconnected, both as an ontological position and as an epistemological procedure” (p. 289), which inherently casts doubt on the feasibility of what Candea proposes. Her suggestion is to focus on processes as opposed to ‘things’ and using a dialectic approach, interrogate how they are constituted and sustained. This is also underlined by van der Veer (2016), who claims that ‘otherness’ should not be exaggerated, since everyone is in some way interacting and communicating with everyone else.

Initially, my incorporation of the comparative angle was driven by my hope that it would help me navigate proximity and distance in the field. I will illustrate this through an example. Amongst Hungarians, there was an excessive amount of anger, resentment, and shame in relation to Hungary emerging from Hungarian politics that would prompt some of my informants to keep silent about their nationality in cross-cultural social contexts. Being Hungarian and sharing some of these feelings, I did not register this as particularly noteworthy until I listened to Venezuelans' patriotic accounts of love for their homeland. While Venezuelans also hoarded resentment towards certain politicians, this did not impact how they felt about their home country. Had I not looked at the Venezuelan community in parallel, I might have never questioned why Hungarians acted the way they did. For me, comparison served first and foremost as a tool of critical self-awareness, offsetting the limitations of both insider and outsider ethnography.

Working comparatively has also deepened the analytical scope of my work. As Robert Borofsky (2019) points out, comparisons "do not necessarily prove a point. But they help to make sense of data about a group by broadening the frame of analysis. They offer the opportunity for new insights and syntheses" (para. 10). I believe that comparative research has the potential to take the ethnographer further in theorising. While I often struggled to find a parallel for what seemed interesting in one group, once I identified key connecting themes or patterns, important theoretical insights would emerge, not in spite of the differences, but exactly because of them. As Borofsky further contends, without comparative studies that integrate ethnographic data across different groups, anthropology risks remaining a fragmented discipline, offering isolated claims with unclear significance.

In my own research, I relied on a revised form of Candea's (2019) lateral and frontal comparison, adopting the two dimensions to my unique positionality. As Claude Lévi-Strauss (e.g. 1964) points out, thinking in binary oppositions is an unavoidable aspect of human cognition and being implicated in the Hungarian context, I could not entirely detach myself from a comparative mode of observing. I often found myself assessing one group in relation to the other – and against my previous way of seeing the world, largely defined by my Hungarian identity –, even when trying to approach them 'laterally'. This is why Hart (2018) argues that our focus as researchers should be on "how key processes are constituted in relation to one another through […] interconnected arenas of everyday life" (pp. 374-5). While I consider pure lateral thinking a theoretical abstraction, striving for it helped me stay cognisant of the judgments emerging from a comparative gaze.

Notwithstanding, in my analysis, I did make a conscious effort to understand the two groups in their unique contexts first before turning my attention to connecting patterns. The structure of my chapters reflects this effort: they predominantly start by analysing each group separately before bringing the two case studies together to reflect on shared characteristics and contradictions in a later section. As such, sentence- and paragraph-level comparisons are rare. This approach, while less systematic in appearance, was ultimately a more respectful way of approaching the complexity of the two groups' lived experiences and had the added benefit of allowing me to incorporate a few analytical points only relevant to one group.

According to Susanne Küchler (2017), ethnographic comparison is a "unique combination of generalizing versus particularizing dimensions" (p. 1). This creates a

fundamental tension for Anthropology, a discipline that often emphasises complexity over simplistic answers. In the writing process, it became obvious that comparison inevitably requires reduction: in order to generate broader insights, certain details had to be abstracted. As Küchler points out, "microscopic description [can] no longer coexist with the macroscopic perspective demanded by the comparative method" (p. 2), which is reinforced by Mathijs Pelkmans's (2022) argument that "creating 'shared ground' flattens particularities" (10).

In order to think theoretically about the two groups, ultimately, I had to focus on dominant patterns. While I elaborate on the nuances pertinent to each case study in the sections dedicated to them – for instance, how gender or age within the national groups impacts behaviour – when comparing, I rely on the overarching tendencies, for which some level of abstraction was necessary. At the very core of my project was a fourfold division of my field: the object of my comparison was not purely Venezuelan versus Hungarian migrants but also Venezuelan Chavista versus Hungarian Fidesz supporter as well as Venezuelan Chavista versus Venezuelans contra-regime migrants. As no two people feel the same commitment or resistance towards relevant regimes, these categories are by default reductionist. I hence applied what van der Veer (2016) calls a "necessarily fragmentary approach to social life, in which the intensive study of a fragment is used to gain a perspective on a larger whole" (p. 9), while keeping in mind that our 21st-century understanding of the rational and 'individualised' human being defies society-wide generalisations.

This leads on to my next point around the challenge of defining social groups. As Candea (2019) aptly observes, "we invoke cultural units, social groups or patterns of

behaviour, while all the time implying that we are well aware these are just convenient fictions and that reality is far more complex. We analogise entities while mentioning in passing that of course they are also, in other ways, profoundly different, or contrast them while gesturing to the fact that in many other ways they fade into one another." (p. 8). This tension was ever-present in my fieldwork. In today's interconnected world, the boundaries between groups are increasingly blurred, and lived experiences frequently defy neat categorisation. A case in point was my informant Beatriz: born and raised in Venezuela to Hungarian and Austrian parents, she spent her formative years in Central Europe and made a point of only speaking to me in Hungarian. Despite her blond hair, porcelain skin, and mannerisms that reminded me of my Hungarian grandparents, she effortlessly blended in with her Venezuelan peers. Still – and most importantly from the perspective of my research –, her Hungarian heritage made her a target of the Hungarian state's diasporic outreach. How, then, was I to categorise Beatriz? I ultimately approached her as Venezuelan as this was the community she identified with and in which she actively participated. Nonetheless, my dilemma highlights that classifying identities is often delicate business, in this case due to what Fernando Coronil (2000, p. 357), referring to Venezuela, calls the "mutual constitution of Europe and its colonies, and their reverberations in the present" (in Hart, 2018, p. 388).

Complexities emerging from the fluidity of identity categories were not confined to individual cases. Over time, I began experiencing my two case studies as not parallel and distinct but overlapping and entangled. Some of my participants, regardless of national background, frequented the same spaces, consumed the same products, and were impacted by the same regulations of the British state. The best friend of a Venezuelan participant in London was Hungarian, the two groups would often take up

the same types of jobs, and when I revealed my nationality to a Venezuelan participant, she impressed me with fascinating insights about my culture acquired through regular visits to the market and traditional dance performances held at Caracas's Hungarian House despite having no Hungarian ancestry. This recognition blurred the lines between Hungarian and Venezuelan migrant experiences and prompted me to question whether it is ever fully possible, or even desirable, to delineate characteristics along national lines. Instead, I came to understand these groups as co-constituting a shared social reality, one I inhabited alongside them, whereby I was also becoming a bit Venezuelan, a bit British and was taking on surprising new elements of my own culture, experiencing first-hand Hart's (2018) argument that the researcher's involvement shapes processes that underlie comparison. The comparative lens also made me critical of methodological nationalism (e.g. Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) as I came to understand how national categories often obscure the transnational and hybrid realities amongst which migrants' lives unfold.

The problematics of commensurability, that is, the question of whether it is ever truly possible to compare social phenomena across different contexts using uniform metrics, were also key to address, central to which is the challenge of identifying appropriate units of comparison. Can we meaningfully place concepts like 'home' side by side in the two groups if they are shaped by different conditions and connotations? How can it be treated as a stable category of analysis when, for a Hungarian participant, it may evoke a negotiable geopolitical location, whereas for a Venezuelan informant it may signify a site of longing or irreversible loss? Moreover, while I paid increased attention not to adopt the state's vocabulary, especially regarding the term 'diaspora', I found myself confined to analytical categories which often did not nuance national

specificities enough. Comparison risks essentialising the very categories it interrogates: when we juxtapose concepts like citizenship, ethnicity, or return, we may inadvertently reify them. This is problematic because, as Pelkmans and Walker (2022) argue, these categories are often constructions themselves. It is in this limited but nonetheless crucial sense that I must acknowledge the validity of some concerns raised by my critics: while comparative ethnography offers powerful insights, it also risks devaluing the differences it seeks to explore.

Notwithstanding, I can only hope that my study demonstrates the value of comparative ethnography and, in doing so, dispels concerns around comparing less obvious groups. Pelkmans (2022) argues that the general dismissive attitude towards 'comparing apples to oranges' stems from the fact that in its quotidian use, comparison presupposes similarity and therefore, placing the two fruits side by side falsely suggests that they are similar when they are not. At the same time, as he argues, resistance might derive from uncertainty over the "absence or mix up of a larger category" (p. 7) other than fruit – or migrant in my case –, which rules out the possibility of comparison altogether or deceitfully presumes that one belongs to the other's group. My perception was that 'good comparisons' were widely understood to be grounded in pre-existing, closely related categories, such as Latin American sending countries or groups engaged in intra-EU migration. Still, I contend that the merit of my research lies exactly in thinking outside of long-held grids of comparison, since, as Pelkmans (2022) argues, "most productive comparisons are 'comparisons that object' or destabilize their own terms" (p. 5).

I do, nonetheless, emphasise the importance of practicing comparison with consideration to pertinent ethics, especially when it involves groups of asymmetrical vulnerabilities. The act of comparison inevitably involves choices about what counts as similar and different, and which dimensions of experience are foregrounded or sidelined and as such, has the potential to reproduce power imbalances. In my research, the ethics of comparison became particularly conspicuous given the dissimilar geopolitical contexts of the two groups. Hungarian migrants, as EU citizens, often navigate mobility with legal and infrastructural privilege. Some Venezuelan migrants, by contrast, face legal exclusion and/or racial prejudice (even if most of my Venezuelan informants tended to be socioeconomically privileged, often of European ancestry and in possession of EU documents). To compare them without continuously pointing to these structural disadvantages risks presenting them as enjoying the same baseline. Therefore, while keeping my focus on the 'migrant from an autocratic state' category, throughout the dissertation, I made a conscious effort not to diminish the difference in the urgency and scale of the crisis people left from and duly address its consequences.

Reflecting on the comparative method from a practical perspective, two aspects must be highlighted. Engaging in comparative ethnography often felt like conducting two doctoral projects simultaneously. It required not only a comparable depth of background knowledge of two groups but also doubled fieldwork commitments. The comparative approach demanded switching linguistic registers daily: I parallelly worked in Hungarian, Spanish, and English – the languages of my informants and that of my field site. Beyond relying on different sets of grammar and vocabulary, this also required comfortably navigating divergent discursive styles, including the contrast between inductive and deductive reasoning as well as the standard of using short and to-the-point

sentences in English, syntactically complex sentences with compressed ideas in Hungarian versus long, multi-clause sentences and repeated restatements in Spanish. Similarly, I relied on analytical frameworks and insights drawn from three distinct ethnographic and knowledge production traditions, each rooted in their separate socio-political contexts.

As a result of my double engagement, I experienced profound professional growth. My dual expertise has unlocked unexpected opportunities, allowing me to undertake a Venezuela-specific internship while being invited to conferences solely focused on Eastern Europe. I developed expertise in both intra-EU and Global South to Global North mobility. Regardless, it also must be highlighted that a three-year DPhil programme often lacks the structural capacity to support a project of this magnitude. While I acknowledge that all research has its unique challenges, I often witnessed peers reaching key milestones more quickly despite investing the same amount of time in their research. Writing comparatively also posed unique difficulties: beyond the fact that I had to leave out abundant rich material as it simply would not yield to comparison, due to the expectation to show comparable ethnographic evidence, the volume of my writing often exceeded the word limit allowed and a significant portion of my time was spent cutting words.

I intend this dissertation as an invitation for more comparative work in Anthropology. Comparative work illuminates processes, connections, and patterns that might otherwise remain overlooked; generates new conceptual vocabularies; and exposes global entanglements. Rather than shying away from comparison, the anthropologist's task should be to practice it critically and reflexively. As the comparative lens has been

central to the development of my analytical framework, the next section reflects on how juxtaposition across cases has generated key conceptual insights. Thereafter, in the Methodology section, I illustrate what comparison looks like as an everyday practice and how I translated the considerations discussed in this section into the way I carried out fieldwork.

Analytical framework and contributions

Over the past few decades, scholars have paid increased attention to how migrants remain connected to the places they left behind. Advances in telecommunications and international mobility have reconfigured the relationship that holds between migrants and their countries of origin as they have enabled individuals to live across borders and maintain parallel engagements in multiple social, political, and cultural worlds. Simultaneously, however, transnational conditions have empowered states to extend their influence beyond their territorial boundaries and actively shape the lives of their emigrants. Academic inquiry has closely followed these developments, exploring both how migrants organise themselves to influence homeland affairs from afar (e.g., Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2001; Bernal, 2014), and how states recognise migrants as potential resources and reclaim them as parts of an expanded polity (e.g., Gamlen, 2008; Boccagni, 2011; Margheritis, 2011).

People in the focus of my study constitute parts of significant emigration flows from two countries where autocratic regimes led by populist leaders are increasingly limiting access to democratic rights. Ashley Anderson, Jason Brownlee, and Killian Clarke (2022) characterise autocracy as “politically exclusive rule” (p. 1), arguing that it is

easier to define it in negative terms as “non-democracy” (p. 6). Although some scholars distinguish between autocratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian styles of leadership based on the locus of power, personalization of rule, or institutional constraints (e.g. Linz, 2022; Köllner and Kailitz, 2013; Glasius, 2018), the terms are frequently used interchangeably in both public and academic discourse. In this dissertation, I do not seek to provide a typological account of regime types. Rather, I adopt a more functional approach, focusing on how the proliferation of rulers who concentrate power, limit pluralism, and govern through a combination of coercion, patronage, and charisma takes us above this distinction.

As Vicente L. Rafael (2022) describes in his book ‘The Sovereign Trickster’, “I am much less interested in determining what Duterte is […] as what he does – the technics of his rule, the rhetoric of his humor, his administration of fear, and the projection of his masculinity and misogyny.” (p. 3). My approach is similar. I understand autocracy as a historically and ideologically situated form of rule in which power is enacted not only through coercive institutional apparatuses but also through moral authority, affective regimes, and discursive claims to legitimacy. Drawing on the Anthropology of the state (e.g. Ferguson, 2002; Sharma and Gupta, 2006), I argue that autocratic states do more than repress: they produce specific kinds of subjects by mobilising narratives of national belonging, appropriating diasporic imaginaries, and defining the moral boundaries of citizenship (Trouillot, 2001; Ong, 1999). My focus, then, is not on state structures, but on the ways in which regimes re-shape the political and moral agency of migrants through regulating diaspora engagement and shaping migrant subjectivities beyond their borders.

Before their respective shifts toward autocracy, Hungary and Venezuela experienced markedly different political histories. Between 1949 and 1989, Hungary was a socialist one-party state embedded within the Soviet geopolitical sphere. Under the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, a centrally planned economy and tight ideological control characterised its political and economic reality. While János Kádár's post-1956 'Goulash Communism' introduced limited economic reforms, political pluralism remained restricted. It was only with the turnover of 1989 that a liberal democratic parliamentary system was introduced. In the decade that followed, power alternated primarily between the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum and the reformed post-communist Hungarian Socialist Party, often in coalition with liberal forces like the Alliance of Free Democrats.

Venezuela, by contrast, was governed for much of the 20th century by a system that was democratic in form but flawed in practice (Roberts, 2020). Following the end of military rule in 1958, the Punto Fijo Pact established a framework for power-sharing among the country's main political parties, which provided a degree of stability (Roberts 2020; Latouche, Muno and Gericke, 2023). Nonetheless, it entrenched corruption and clientelism, peaking amid the economic turmoil of the 1980s and 1990s (Wilpert, 2007). In both Hungary's post-socialist liberal order and Venezuela's rentier capitalism, many citizens felt excluded from political and economic life, leading to fatigue with existing structures. Autocratic leaders instrumentalised these frustrations to redefine national identity and centralise power. In Venezuela, the collapse of oil revenues and the resulting Caracazo riots of 1989 intensified public discontent, eroding trust in traditional elites, and facilitating Hugo Chávez's rise (Roberts 2020; López Maya, 2002; 2003). Conversely, in Hungary, the neoliberal restructuring produced widespread social

inequalities, regional disparities, and political disillusionment, which provided fertile ground for the rise of populist nationalism under Viktor Orbán (Sebők and Simons, 2022; Ríos-Rivera, 2025).

Hungary and Venezuela suffered democratic backsliding through distinct yet comparable methods of constitutional and institutional manipulation. Orbán has relied on Fidesz's parliamentary supermajority to erode checks and balances, using constitutional amendments, media control, and electoral restructuring (Kovács and Trencsényi, 2020; Kornai, 2015). Venezuela's shift was more abrupt and coercive. Under Hugo Chávez and later Nicolás Maduro, the government bypassed institutional rules through decrees, rigged elections, media control, and repression of the opposition (Corrales and Penfold, 2011). Nonetheless, the economic conditions underpinning the two regimes are remarkably different. Hungary, as an EU member, benefits from structural funds and foreign investment, enabling Orbán to sustain relative economic stability while Venezuela's shift to autocracy triggered severe economic collapse and hyperinflation. The Maduro regime increasingly relies on repression, and the politicization of humanitarian aid to maintain control (HRW, 2019; CELAG, 2021), sustaining close alliances with Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba to shield the regime internationally. In parallel, Hungary cultivates strategic partnerships with Russia, China, the United States, Israel, and Turkey and other illiberal or populist regimes, positioning itself as a challenger to the EU consensus. While both regimes have curtailed civil liberties, Hungary retains a façade of constitutional order while Venezuela faces an unprecedented crisis – even if this is systematically denied by the government.

In contemporary Venezuela and Hungary, socialism and nationalism, respectively, serve as the core ideological instruments, through which autocratic regimes consolidate authority and mobilise support. Both regimes rely on populist rhetorics (Pappas, 2019), portraying themselves as defenders of the 'true nation' against internal and external threats to delegitimise dissent – highlighting that nationalist elements are also present in Chavism. Orbán promotes an exclusionary, ethnocultural nationalism grounded in national sovereignty, Christian values, and grievance over historic victimhood. This is operationalised through anti-immigration laws, the promotion of family and reproductive policies, the rewriting of national history, and the vilification of both the EU and civil society (Kovács and Trencsényi, 2020). On the other hand, Maduro, continuing Chávez's '21st century socialism' model blends Marxist principles with anti-imperialist and class-based socialist rhetoric, arguing for redistributive social justice and blaming foreign actors, especially the US, for Venezuela's situation.

Rooted in my interest in this dichotomy, a central concept of this dissertation is ideology. Talal Asad (1979) approaches the anthropological study of ideology as a "preoccupation with essential human meanings – as embodied in the authentic social categories, actions and discourses of given cultures" (p. 617). While ideology encompasses multiple, often overlapping, domains that explain how the world works, my focus here is primarily political: I am interested in the left/right divide, and specifically how socialism and nationalism function as political principles. At the same time, I acknowledge that political ideology is also constituted through dimensions of economic, cultural, and, to some extent, religious ideologies. It is therefore necessary to situate the concept of ideology within Anthropology more broadly. Several theorists (e.g., Asad, 1979; Humphrey, 2023) highlight a tension between ideology understood as

vaguely synonymous with culture and as an instrument of political power. Drawing on Louis Althusser (1976), Caroline Humphrey (2023) describes the former as "all pervasive and present throughout history: our values, desires and preferences are always inculcated by ideological practice and institutions" (p. 20). She then contrasts this with Maurice Bloch's (1977) framing of ideology as "an integrated totality of social classifications and meanings that made communication possible and structured a prevailing social order" (in Humphrey 2023, p. 20). It is in this latter sense – and admittedly emerging from a British liberal background – that Humphrey approaches ideology as "an explicit doctrine held by a politically dominant group to justify and mystify their own interests at the expense of others" (p. 20) – the definition closest to the way I understand political ideology in my study.

Nonetheless, at the core of this dissertation is the interaction between the two above-mentioned spheres: political ideologies as instruments of power, and their 'vernacular' (Kruglova, 2017) iterations that structure everyday life. This delineation poses questions like Asad's of how social change – understood as a transformation of concepts – can occur if we stick to the view that "nothing can be said or done with meaning if it does not fit into an a priori system, the 'authentic' culture which defines the essential social being of the people concerned" (p. 618). Humphrey's analysis of the Soviet Union sheds light on the quandary: she argues that the Soviet Union provided a 'totalising cognitive map' for its citizens yet "saturation could never be total" (p. 21). She argues that embodied and affective experience provided breeding ground for 'non-ideological' or even 'counter-ideological' ideas – even if without a clear political agenda. I approach my own research through this dichotomy, examining political ideologies as simultaneously serving 'social functions' that reproduce order, and as structures that

individuals may want to break away from when they conflict with their own visions of a 'good life'.

Katherine Verdery (1998) asserts that as a membership category, citizenship is a device for assigning individuals to states, thereby generating belonging. Citizenship separates those who are included from those who are excluded, attaching the former to the state as the insurer of their rights, at the same time absorbing them as subjects. As Luke Desforges, Rhys Jones and Mike Woods (2005) highlight, traditionally, citizenship was a mark of belonging to a well-defined space and the rights and responsibilities that were incorporated in this membership were fulfilled in that civic framework. However, as Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (2006) emphasise, today citizenship is increasingly crosscut by global processes: it is not only administered and regulated transnationally but also imagined and exercised as such.

In Thomas Humphrey Marshall's (1950) definition, citizenship is a full statutory membership of a political body, which allows for participation in a country's political system and lays out the array of rights and responsibilities that hold between an individual and the state. He points out, however, that citizenship is not a unitary concept, but consists of the subcategories of civil, political, and social citizenship and calls attention to the fact that the sets of available rights might differ according to membership. Based on Renato Rosaldo's (1994a) 'cultural citizenship', Verdery (1998) highlights that a fourth set of rights might be added to these that she calls 'cultural rights', which is often the only fully accessible privilege for diaspora members.

The affirmation of citizenship ties is a crucial aspect in the functioning of diasporas. Thus, the dialectic interplay between the enactment of self-understanding and the active

negotiation of external categories that constitute the basis of being seen as an eligible co-national (Jenkins, 2008) is essential to consider when evaluating relations built with the host state from abroad. Engin F. Isin and Bryan Turner (2002) explore the bottom-up practices of claiming and expanding rights and building on this, Engin F. Isin and Greg Marc Nielsen (2013) introduce the concept of 'acts of citizenship' that describes processes through which subjects assert entitlement. As John Clammer (2015) explains, just like other aspects of social identity, ethnicity is also performed: it has to be acted out on a daily basis both when assuming a citizenship and when rejecting a citizenship that is already allocated to one. Therefore, Pratsinakis (2021) suggests that it is imperative to examine the performative aspect of citizenship when studying migrants and pay attention to how they actively form their identities by juggling the labels available to them.

Citizenship guarantees political membership in a state. However, over the past few decades, there has been significant debate about what a state is, especially in the context of transnationalism. Some analysts (e.g. Easton, 1953; Almond, Cole and Macridis, 1955; Almond and Coleman, 1960) have even gone as far as to claim that states cannot and should not be studied because of the impossibility of defining their confines. Scholars such as Philip Abrams (1988), Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1985), Bob Jessop (1990), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001) have argued that while it is possible to study the state, doing so requires a fundamental rethinking of our assumptions about it because the notion of the state as an a priori empirical object cannot be sustained. According to Sharma and Gupta (2006), the problem emerges because in state-centric theories, 'the state' has been approached as distinct from society and is often portrayed as a separate actor that possesses the supreme authority to regulate populations within

its territory. As such, it “acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice” (Abrams, 1988, p. 82).

Therefore, Abrams (1988) calls for the investigation of ‘politically organised subjection’ instead and in the process, encourages detachment from institutions in favour of the study of processes that unfold through the daily practice of citizens. Sharma and Gupta (2006) take up this call and summarise their approach in the following words: “We do not take the state as a given – a distinct, fixed and unitary entity that defines the terrain in which other institutions function. Rather, we seek to bring together the ideological and material aspects of state construction, and understand how ‘the state’ comes into being, how ‘it’ is differentiated from other institutional forms, and what effects this construction has on the operation and diffusion of power throughout society.” (p. 8).

In their reading, therefore, the main task of social scientists is to analyse states as socially and culturally constituted, for example by studying the perceptions of the state as it manifests itself in people’s lives, the affects these perceptions generate, and the relevant interactions carried out through specific localised processes. This approach also highlights the role that non-state agencies, such as communities and individuals, have in the operation of governance, a process termed ‘de-statization of government’ by Nicolas Rose (1996). When looking at migrants’ role, the concept of ‘sovereign agency’ (Bryant and Reeves, 2021) is also useful to make sense of engagements, agendas, and assertions directed at the future that connect institutions and subjects in manners that render subjects politically identifiable and adept to perform agentive deeds. As it might often be more of an ambition than an achievement, frequently rooted in the perception of loss

in the political sphere and a longing to reclaim it, it embraces the appeal for a political formation that lets communities acquire a sense of control over their lives.

Studying the state in the framework of transnationalist processes facilitates the rethinking of the state–territory–people triad and the symmetry that is often assumed to hold amongst its components. It allows for the study of institutional and social networks that are scattered around the globe and serve to harmonise and reinforce power. Adopting the above view, however, the focus must stay on individual and collective experiences within transborder power structures and on people's agency to create the desired balance between enjoying rights and privileges while fulfilling obligations pertinent to their membership in different polities.

With the option to 'vote with their feet' (Somin, 2011; Meardi, 2012; Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014) open to migrants, seeking a more liberal environment has often been the response to the non-liberal conditions that emerged in the guise of socialism in Venezuela and the guise of nationalism in Hungary. Hence, the negotiation of diaspora subjectivity is an important avenue where such tensions are transformed, mitigated, or amplified through engagement with the home-state from abroad. As I provide a comprehensive conceptual analysis of the term 'diaspora' and novel analytical contributions to the literature on diaspora engagement in my 'Who is the diaspora?' chapter, I will not go into depth about my understanding of the term here. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that I treat it as an amorphous concept whose meaning and analytical use is hugely debated. Deviating from some core contributions, I understand the concept to be defined by a tangible engagement with the home country as opposed to a collective longing or the practice of culture. Therefore, further to migration being

interpreted as a site for contestation (Anand, 2009), I place the focus on diaspora communities as sites of struggles, in this case between liberal and non-liberal worlds.

Based on my comparison, I propose an overview of the forces that move migrants towards or away from a homewards orientation. I argue that the migration experiences of both groups are shaped primarily by a sense of rupture, stemming from their perception of being failed by the home state, which in turn prompts migrants to contest the state's efforts to define their diaspora subjectivity. While they are not necessarily opposed to the ideological principles of the two dominant regimes, Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants predominantly reject their state-based versions for feeding autocratic systems. However, I argue that various other structural, historic, personal, and cultural factors must also be made part of the analysis. The global distribution of power is crucial: Hungarians are often able to access 'the West' more fully, which pushes them away from engagement with Hungary and towards a life in the UK. Venezuelan migration experiences, in contrast, often contradict previous positive perceptions of immigrant lives in Venezuela, which result in homewards engagement and might ultimately mould into considerations of return in contestation of the state.

However, moral obligations pertinent to personal relations often overrule resolutions emerging from perceptions of the state. While Hungarians are able to undertake regular return trips to meet obligations to kin and community, Venezuelans remain bound to diaspora activism due to the existence of personal networks at home – networks whose eventual repatriation often alleviates their sense of diasporic responsibility. Even as migrants resist the home state affectively and through deliberate acts, they may nonetheless inadvertently reinstate its ideologies. Embodied practices, coping strategies

designed to enhance one's social and economic standing, apolitical forms of diaspora engagement, and critiques forged in relation to the host state may all work to reproduce the regime left behind.

Chapter outline

In my research, I explore the manifold factors that shape the relationship between migrants and their home countries. As such, my dissertation is organised thematically, unfolding around key themes. Dividing these themes into two categories, by and large, Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 7 correspond to state-emigrant relations while Chapters 4 and 6 focus on the role of kin and community in mediating diaspora engagement and structuring subjectivities. Alongside this thematic structure, a loose chronological framework guides the reader through the migrant trajectory, beginning with detachment from the home country through migration and gradually moving towards the potential of re-attachment as it is conceptualised in relation to return visits and considerations for permanent return.

The aim of my work is to provide a nuanced and holistic account of the migrant experience by tracing key moments in which the home country becomes a central actor in migrant lives, either directly or indirectly. At the same time, I pay attention to the social, political, and emotional forces that influence how migrants (re-)orient themselves in relation to their home and host countries. In the process, I weigh a variety of factors, such as geographical proximity/distance, options for legal movement not just to the UK but also back to the home country, the political and economic context of emigration, global divisions of labour and spatial hierarchies, migration legacies and

connotations, nationhood constructions, and the social networks involved in migration. I approach these factors through concepts like hope, nostalgia, 'myth of the homeland', belonging, social obligations, and affect. I conclude my research by assessing how efficient the two states are in governing at a distance and answer the question of whether the right/left divide plays a role in how migrants cultivate connectedness.

I start my dissertation by explaining my methodological choices, my positionality vis-à-vis the two groups, and the ethical dilemmas I encountered. Although it is unusual to devote an entire chapter to 'Methodology', this part of the dissertation also serves to document what comparison looks like when carried out as an everyday practice. In the chapter that follows, 'Embracing migration', I argue that migration is not merely a geographic shift but a journey through ideological, political, and moral landscapes. I illustrate that while migration is often interpreted as a break from the home country, migrants frequently draw inspiration from – and thereby reproduce – home state ideologies after leaving them behind. I do this by highlighting how both expectations about migration and the ways migrants cope when those expectations remain unmet are shaped by the dominant ideological regimes of the home state. I turn my attention to both contemporary and historic migration regimes of the two home countries and underline the role they play not only in controlling movement but also in shaping ideas of what type of people migrants should become. I contend that political ideologies live on as embodied and relational structures that shape how migrants navigate uprooting and imagine belonging.

In my third chapter, 'Who is the diaspora?', I examine how divergent diaspora narratives, moralities, and policies in Hungary and Venezuela shape migrants'

homewards orientations. Using a constructivist lens, I argue that the diaspora is not uniformly engaged, and that analysing the choice of which groups are systematically included or excluded reveals important information about the priorities of home states. Ethnicity plays a central role in both cases: Hungary seeks to build an ethnically homogeneous nation, marginalising those deemed ethnically non-pertinent, while Venezuela embraces ethnic minorities as part of its decolonial agenda, sidelining those of European descent. I introduce the concept of 'diaspora disengagement' to juxtapose Venezuela's approach towards westbound emigrants to Hungary's large-scale diaspora outreach. I argue that the Venezuelan state actively discourages or obstructs this group of emigrants from participating in national life post-migration. Building on this, I develop the concept of 'ideological citizenship' to challenge the dominant trend in diaspora literature of approaching diaspora outreach as primarily driven by economic interests. I argue that both Hungary and Venezuela use diaspora politics to uphold ideologically driven regimes, engaging with those who align with their political visions to reinforce legitimacy through transnational means. Lastly, I illustrate how transborder Hungarians and international supporters of 21st-century socialism are mobilised within these projects, highlighting the instrumental role foreigners are assigned in diaspora construction.

This is followed by my 'Ties that bind' chapter, in which I contend that much of what we tend to understand as migrants being invested in their country of origin is, in fact, care directed at kin and community in the country of origin, which is key to migrants' ongoing construction of personhood across borders. I start this chapter by dissecting why Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants show divergence in terms of their approach to compatriots: shaped by the state's nationalist agenda, Hungarians map the idea of

family onto the nation and consequently experience alienation when the nation fails to meet expectations of communal support. In contrast, Venezuelans project the nation onto family and social networks, as belonging to a community is central to navigating migratory challenges – even when relations are often strained by growing demands for help from home. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how kin relations fuel diaspora activity. Focusing on Venezuelans, I introduce the concept of 'extraction', the overwhelming importance of removing loved ones from the home country and argue that the inability to accomplish extraction cements migrants in diaspora action. I also identify diaspora subjectivity on the side of Hungarians to be largely advanced by the desire to provide cultural continuity for one's (prospective) children, understood as an investment that is only accessible as mediated by the state. Ultimately, I challenge methodological nationalism by arguing that while the nation might be the object of diaspora participation, it is not the primary motivation triggering it.

My fifth chapter, 'Political ideologies in migration', examines how perceptions of political ideologies present in the home country transform when the imaginative pull of new promises becomes contrasted with the lived experience of the previously often idealised United Kingdom. I analyse what meanings socialism and nationalism hold for my informants and what aspects of the two political ideologies stay meaningful in everyday dilemmas in the UK. I begin the chapter by illustrating that Venezuelan migrants' interpretations of socialism often came into conflict with local British understandings, exploring the tension between abstract ideology and lived reality. I also highlight that Hungary's nationalism functions as an imperative for cultural pride for elements of culture often detached from the lives of migrants. By elevating transborder Hungarians as exemplary custodians of culture, diaspora participation becomes a site of

ethnic rivalry. I interrogate the widespread use of ‘apoliticism’ as a self-description among diaspora organisations, suggesting that it often masks political positioning while inadvertently reinforcing existing systems. Finally, I show how political vocabulary is deployed to articulate proposed solutions for the future of the respective home countries.

In my subsequent ‘Return visits’ chapter, I investigate how the (in)ability to avail of trips home shapes perceptions of the home country. I argue that Hungarians access return visits more easily due to geographic proximity, affordability, and political safety, while Venezuelans face greater barriers rooted in the same factors. I argue that the disparity renders return trips qualitatively different: while Hungarians assemble their livelihoods across borders, for Venezuelans, return trips take on a pilgrimage-like experience. I distinguish between the concepts of ‘homesickness’ and ‘nostalgia’ to argue that Hungarians, through repeated visits, confront and often resolve their longing, and are at the same time reminded of the conditions that made them leave. Conversely, for Venezuelans, the home country transforms into a mythical object of desire, anchoring them in perpetual longing and a conviction that Venezuela can be recovered as they remember it, which fuels a homewards orientation and diaspora action.

In my final chapter, ‘The future’, I examine how Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants imagine personal and national futures through the contrasting lenses of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘grudge’. I start the chapter by establishing that in both cases, migration is rooted in the belief that an unwritten ‘social contract’ has been broken by the home state. This results in the affective response of anger in both groups. However, while amongst Hungarians, anger solidifies as grudge, Venezuelans move towards forgiveness as a

potentiality. I argue that these responses are not objective evaluations of the circumstances present in the home country but claims on imagined futures shaped by desires to stay or return. Amongst Venezuelans, forgiveness emerges as a form of empowerment that transforms migrants from passive victims into agents capable of reimagining their relationship with the home state. Conversely, for Hungarians, grudge serves as a coping strategy to resist the Hungarian state's outreach efforts and assert a commitment towards a future in the UK. I show that both emotions are tied to hope, the projection of past experiences onto future possibilities, and function as tools for negotiating belonging within the constraining structures offered by the home state. Ultimately, I evaluate forgiveness and grudge not as opposing but as parallel forms of resistance and collective healing, through which migrants negotiate future trajectories.

Chapter 1 – Methodology

Data collection

I arrived in London on a scorching hot afternoon in June 2022. Dragging my two suitcases from the nearest tube exit to what would be my home for the first months of fieldwork, the magnitude of the task ahead began to weigh on me: I would soon need to make sense of the monster that was London. Urban ethnography – or, in my case, 'megalopolis ethnography' – differs sharply from traditional village ethnography as the boundaries of the field are not pre-defined but must be actively drawn by the researcher. While I was inspired by the city's limitless possibilities, it also demanded a clear delineation of what I would seek out. I had to ask myself: what was the nature of migration, what was to be known about it, and how could I acquire this knowledge? Method is not merely a tool; it is an epistemological act. I therefore begin this section with a reflection on how I approached these fundamental questions.

Home, belonging, and becoming served as my epistemological anchors. I approached migration as not merely a movement across borders, but a profound transformation of selfhood: the migrant is always becoming rather than simply being, reconfiguring ancestral, communal, and kinship ties through their everyday existence. Diasporas constitute reterritorialised networks, challenging static notions of national identity through fluid forms of inhabiting the world. Under such ontological conditions, home is experienced as simultaneously present and absent, familiar and estranged, with migrant lives unfolding within non-linear temporalities, remembering the past and engaging the present while imagining potential futures in relation to multiple locales. Against this backdrop, critical questions emerge: How is being reconstituted in the face of rupture,

dispersion, and memory? What modes of existence do diasporas make possible? And what is the role of transnational processes in migrants' experience?

According to my research design, I aimed to engage with diaspora organisations according to four categories based on two axes: pertinence to the Hungarian or Venezuelan community, and alignment with or contestation of the respective home states. I was aware, however, that such a neat delineation of boundaries would likely be problematic and the categories proved contentious, but not in the way I had anticipated. In my Transfer of Status paper, I noted that in the Hungarian context, diaspora outreach had transformed many independently established cultural organisations into state-affiliated ones, making non-state-aligned groups difficult to access ethnographically. Yet in the field, I discovered that many members of state-affiliated organisations were critical of the Hungarian regime, which ultimately rendered it harder to access Fidesz supporters in my ethnography. Moreover, although I had identified an active opposition group linked to a Hungarian political party, it functioned as more of a social circle than a politically engaged collective – with apoliticism also being conspicuous in the self-presentation of the Venezuelan 'opposition' group. Conversely, many pro-regime Venezuelan organisations had an international membership, which complicated my understanding of the concept of diaspora. These discrepancies have constituted a valuable field of enquiry, central to my 'Who is the diaspora?' and 'Political ideologies in migration' chapters.

While I had pre-selected four organisations, I maintained contingency plans by simultaneously engaging with multiple associations – all of which appear under pseudonyms in this text – in the early stages of fieldwork. I was aware that in some cases,

the ‘chemistry’ might not be right, and I was intent on engaging only if the host welcomed my presence. While I initially considered VeNidito as an alternative to VeneHelp, my parallel engagement led VeNidito to discourage my presence despite the two organisations’ shared humanitarian goals. Ultimately, after weighing how they fit my purposes, I settled on the very same organisations I had pre-defined with one exception: Diaspora Aid C.I.C. was replaced by InMpulse due to the former’s inactivity. While this might suggest that my effort to engage with multiple associations was in vain, my initial wide-ranging involvement provided an excellent overview of the diaspora scene in London and informed my broader thinking about diaspora formation, offering valuable insights for my ‘Who is the diaspora?’ chapter.

I had no prior ties to any of the organisations studied, apart from nominating VeneHelp as a beneficiary of my college’s annual charity fundraiser before my research took on a comparative dimension, inspired by their strong reputation and transparency. With donations made under the college’s name, I did not disclose my involvement until the end of fieldwork and when I did, VeneHelp’s director confirmed that she never made the connection. As a general rule, I also avoided relying on gatekeepers as I wanted communities to accept me for who I was, not because I was endorsed by somebody else.

In the Hungarian context, my research focused on Pannónika and InMpulse. Founded by refugees of World War II and the 1956 revolution against Soviet occupation, Pannónika operated as an independent cultural centre for decades before its recent incorporation into the state’s diaspora network. Now a recipient of Hungarian state funding and host of diaspora facilitators, it functions as a site where national belonging is both independently fostered and politicised. InMpulse, by contrast, is the UK-based

supporter circle of the InMpulse Movement, a centrist Hungarian political party founded in 2017 to advocate for a new generation of political leaders in Hungary.

Comparable structures were present in the Venezuelan context, where VeneHelp and Patria Bolivariana represented opposing stances toward the home state. VeneHelp, founded in 2016 and run by Venezuelan emigrants, frames its humanitarian work, which ranges from sending medical aid to facilitating access to proper nutrition, as apolitical. Yet in practice, they function as a form of constructive opposition, addressing state failures through resource mobilisation. In contrast, Patria Bolivariana, saliently constituted of both Venezuelan and international members, aligns with the Venezuelan government, legitimising the state's sovereignty through protest, educational outreach, and media engagement.

While I gained immersion through the events of organisations, my focus was ultimately on migrant lives. I had previously mapped out where Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants could most likely be found and envisioned basing myself in Lambeth. In reality, however, my participants were scattered around London, primarily living on the outskirts, but gathering in central locations, rendering it impossible to pinpoint a favourable location. Gentrification and rising demand in Lambeth also made rent difficult. Ultimately, after a four-month sublet in Stratford, I spent most of my fieldwork living in Lewisham, deliberately avoiding visits to Oxford during fieldwork. However, I returned to Hungary four times for short stays. These trips enriched my fieldwork by allowing me to reproduce some of the same practices many of my Hungarian participants engaged in, feeding directly into the development of my 'Return visits' chapter.

Although the pandemic disrupted the early stages of my doctoral work, it ultimately worked in my favour during fieldwork. I entered the field just as in-person events resumed, with participants eager to revive human contact after nearly two years of restrictions. This timing was intentional: I had strongly resisted conducting ethnography solely online and was prepared to delay my fieldwork to ensure that I could participate in person. Before entering the field, I undertook four preliminary trips to London of one day each to verify if conditions were adequate for my entry.

Since the organisations hosted events biweekly or even more sporadically, my initial approach was to embrace every emerging opportunity to immerse myself in the two migrant communities outside institutional frameworks as well. I monitored Eventbrite, Facebook Events, and MeetUp almost daily, and subscribed to relevant newsletters. Whenever I identified a new group, I reached out to ask for permission to attend their events. When no response came, I would turn up and introduce myself as a researcher. Later, most invitations came directly from participants, though I continued to track event platforms throughout. As much as I could balance the demands of my parallel fields, I tried to say yes to everything.

Within VeneHelp, I attended numerous fundraising events, and I was regularly invited to social events for the organisation's volunteers. Just as I entered the field, a collaboration was emerging between the association and the UN's IOM and VeneHelp, and I was asked to assist in exchange for permission to collect data in the process. Through VeneHelp, I also became a member of Doradas, a social group for elderly Venezuelans. As a volunteer explained, many seniors are brought to the UK by family but often become isolated due to language barriers and the absence of peer networks.

While Doradas held formal meetings monthly, they also organised frequent informal gatherings such as BBQs, picnics, and prayer sessions, where I was always welcome. Given the availability of its members, Doradas became one of my most regular points of contact with Venezuelans and a space where I developed lasting friendships, marked by an unforgettable surprise farewell party. In both VeneHelp and Doradas, improvised 'citizenship ceremonies' were common, and I received one from each group and witnessed many others. I elaborate on these in my 'Who is the diaspora?' chapter.

Events organised by Patria Bolivariana were less frequent but the few that were held proved exceptionally rich in data. A key Venezuelan member of the organisation also curated a number of events in support of socialism independently, prompting me to focus on the portraiture of her journey toward Chavism. She hosted monthly film screenings of predominantly leftist Latin American films in her garden during the summer and in a local library during the winter. She also organised a screening showcasing the work of her cohort of filmmakers at the Venezuelan Consulate. In addition, I attended events held by another organisation in support of socialism in Venezuela, such as a documentary screening and discussion at the Marx House, and an anti-imperialist solidarity gathering at the Consulate's Bolivar Hall.

I aimed to involve a diverse range of participants across age, gender, socio-economic status, migration trajectory, and level of diaspora engagement. I quickly realised, however, that Venezuelan diaspora organisations would only give me access to middle- and upper-class migrants. Reaching working-class Venezuelans proved a challenge as many juggled multiple jobs, lived on London's outskirts, and rarely attended community events. Illustratively, when I asked a participant for an interview, he sent me

his availability, which was between 10 pm and 6 am most days, explaining that he was working the rest of the time.

I found two ways to address this problem. Firstly, I took on a job at Arepana, a Venezuelan ethnic food stall at a marketplace. I had worked in hospitality throughout my higher education trajectory abroad and saw it as the quintessential migrant job. The role turned into a key field site: my bosses as well as many of my colleagues were Venezuelan, and while our hands were busy making arepas, we could converse about topics relevant to my research. The job also gave me access to additional events: company team-building days, two Christmas parties, and informal gatherings with colleagues. Although I had initially also hoped to find participants among customers, the fast-paced nature of the job made this impossible. Secondly, I offered free English classes to Venezuelan migrants unable to afford them: an effort to give back to the community while deepening my immersion. The initiative was well received but proved unsustainable beyond six classes, as participants were unable to commit to regular attendance due to work demands.

I also became a regular at Vínculos, a charity serving Latin American migrants, initially drawn by a series of Venezuelan textile design workshops held shortly after my arrival. I later attended the programmes of a thematic month dedicated to Venezuelan art and became a frequent participant in a monthly discussion group led by a Latin American anthropologist on cultural differences. While I did not use the emerging conversations as data, they informed my broader understanding of Latin American migrant experiences. I adopted the same approach when attending a workshop exploring the Latin America/Europe divide through kinaesthetic methods. I frequently visited

Venezuelan bazaars and Venezuelan entertainment events, comedy shows, concerts, food festivals, and large-scale cultural celebrations like the Nativity of John the Baptist, an important Venezuelan festivity.

I also joined a theatre initiative that invited Latin American migrants to creatively express their stories, which made me identify improv theatre as an excellent ethnographic data collection platform that re-activates embodied memories, beliefs, and experiences. Through the group, I befriended a Venezuelan queer couple made up of a playwright and an actor, who became my key participants. I attended numerous events with them, gaining insight into their efforts to raise awareness of the Venezuelan crisis through theatre and multimedia productions. Participants frequently invited me to private gatherings, birthdays, British citizenship celebrations, and before Christmas, I participated in the traditional hallaca-making process multiple times. As many of these events were held at London-based Venezuelan eateries, they also led me to sample various Venezuelan dishes and allowed me insights into how food anchors diasporic identities.

During the pandemic, which I spent in Argentina, I had my first exposure to Latin American cinema and was immediately captivated by it. I came to understand it as a politically charged art form that combines cultural reflection, social commentary, and elements of magical realism to tell deeply human stories – often in ways that resemble ethnography. My fascination with the genre made me seek out opportunities to familiarise myself with more films while in the field. In addition to the monthly screenings hosted by my Chavista informant, I attended various other movie events, many of which were organised by a Venezuelan film critic and distributor. Once we

became friends, she recommended titles to aid my enquiry, rendering film-viewing a valuable supplementary component of my fieldwork. These movies also became important points of discussion with my informants, offering insights into how cinematic representations reflect lived experiences.

On the Hungarian side, my principal focus remained on Pannónika. With one exception, I attended every bimonthly ball the organisation held. These events, featuring a three-course sit-down meal and entertainment, offered ideal opportunities for in-depth conversations with attendees. I regularly participated in the biweekly church services and post-service lunches, as well as thematic markets, and commemorative events. I frequently signed up to volunteer at relevant events, helping in the kitchen, serving food, or selling beverages – all of which allowed informal conversations to unfold.

I took part in most of the monthly film screenings held at Pannónika and attended every meeting of the Hungarian Book Club, which, while independently organised, was hosted at the venue. Initially, I had intended to focus on the work of the Kőrösi delegate assigned to the organisation. However, due to worsening labour conditions, including an unchanged salary since 2017, which, by 2022 barely covered basic costs in London and the extension of responsibilities to multiple organisations, several delegates withdrew before their scheduled arrival. As a result, no one was ultimately placed at Pannónika during my fieldwork. I managed to identify one delegate serving three other Hungarian organisations nearby, but when I contacted her, she was suspicious of my intentions and declined both a meeting and further communication. This did not surprise me given the obligation facilitators are under to seek official permission before any account provided in relation to the programme.

I also attended as many events as my schedule allowed at Hungarian Horizons, a state-run cultural centre, including national commemorations, theatre performances, film screenings, and a patriotic poetry recital competition. While the staff at Horizons were not responsive to my outreach, the Embassy's personnel were remarkably supportive. I was frequently granted access to invitation-only events and thus became a regular attendee of networking functions, lectures, and workshops. I took part in the full-day 'Future: Hungary' conference, which brought together key figures involved in diaspora affairs with young professionals and students, as well as a Conference for teachers of Hungarian in the diaspora. Lastly, I attended a series of state-coordinated talent development and career workshops, designed to reconnect Hungarian students with Hungary.

I had been keeping an eye on InMpulse for a long time, but during the first half of my fieldwork, they remained largely inactive, likely due to feeling demoralised following the 2022 elections. Nonetheless, once activities resumed, the group entered a vibrant phase, organising book clubs, social gatherings, and national day commemorations. The head of the organisation also invited me to several Oxford-Cambridge alumni events, fascinating replicas of Oxonian traditions adapted for a Hungarian audience.

In February 2023, I came across an event invitation that particularly intrigued me: a Hungarian weekend school was staging a pig slaughter, a tradition in countryside Hungary. Although now banned under EU regulations, such gatherings were a quintessential part of village life during my childhood. This experience led to further visits as I found the school an excellent space for conversations with parents. I also attended several events hosted by a Hungarian for-profit entertainment company,

including talks by journalists, former politicians, and celebrity psychologists. Occasionally, I visited London universities to listen to lectures by Hungarian academics on relevant topics. I also took a special interest in a Hungarian theatre group staging self-written plays inspired by members' migration experience, which provided an excellent basis for comparison with questions tackled by the Venezuelan theatre group. Lastly, I made a few attempts to engage in other cultural activities, most notably Hungarian folk dancing.

At all these events, I practised what James Clifford (1996) famously called 'deep hanging out'[2]: a mode of immersive, prolonged participant observation whereby I would minimise my own self and adopt a 'sponge mindset', soaking in everything around me on a cognitive, emotional, and sensory level. I made a habit of arriving before the official start of events and staying until the very end to watch the whole process unfold. During the events themselves, I paid close attention to what was said and done and how these contradicted or reinforced each other. I often slipped away to the bathroom to jot down fieldnotes while details were still fresh in my memory. My long commutes, mostly by bus, also became productive spaces for completing field diaries.

As I began my DPhil during the pandemic, I was obliged to complete a Digital Methods course, which proved useful for supplementing in-person fieldwork with online participant observation. I became a member of relevant Facebook and WhatsApp groups and regularly monitored them for content shared and discussions emerging, but also paid attention to other features, like the advertisements targeting the two groups. My ethical approach was that anything shared in public groups was content shared with the

[2] While Renato Rosaldo (1994b) is often credited with the concept, it became widely employed after James Clifford used it to describe Clifford Geerzt's approach to fieldwork.

world. Thus, in such groups, I only introduced myself as a researcher once, at the very beginning. In more private WhatsApp groups, I always requested permission individually. In hindsight, I would have invested less time in online data collection, as the insights gained were not proportional to the time invested.

I dedicated the first six months of my fieldwork to participant observation. I participated in approximately 120 events, during the first months attending something almost daily. Although I was initially concerned that events in the two communities might coincide, this only emerged as a problem at certain times of the year, for example during the advent period. In case of overlaps, I generally tried to attend at least one part of both events. Early on, I felt frustrated about missing events, either due to overcommitment or finding out about them too late despite extensive monitoring, but I ultimately understood that asking informants to tell me about them could produce equally rich insights.

While I conducted a handful of interviews during the immersion phase, the majority took place from February 2023. The more time I had spent within each community, the better-quality data interviews yielded. One notable shift occurred at Pannónika: at early events, several participants praised the Hungarian state's involvement, but once rapport had been established, some felt comfortable voicing ambivalence or outright criticism during interviews. All of my interview contacts emerged organically through events I frequented. The only exception was one person I reached out to online during the second month of fieldwork after noticing his social media posts. However, he later turned out to be a central figure of VeneHelp, which means that our encounter was imminent. Some participants also offered to introduce me to friends or family for

interviews. While I initially accepted these offers, I found that interviews with people I had not interacted with previously yielded lower-quality data, likely due to the lack of trust. Additionally, in these cases, I also lacked the broader context gained through participant observation, which normally enriched my analysis. Given that I had no shortage of potential interviewees within my existing networks, I ultimately chose to focus on those I already knew and declined further recommendations.

My interviews focused on Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants who had lived a significant part of their lives in their home countries and moved to London within the past two decades. While my original intention was to only interview residents of London, I eventually came to approach this criterion flexibly, broadening my scope to people whose main social or organisational ties were to London-based groups, even if they lived outside the city. In total, I conducted 53 semi-structured interviews involving 54 participants – 26 Hungarians and 28 Venezuelans of an average length of 1 hour and 36 minutes. Ages ranged between 19 and 73 amongst Hungarians and 29 and 73 amongst Venezuelans and 17 Hungarians as well as 18 Venezuelans identified as women. A list of the questions guiding my interviews is provided in the 'Appendix'. One interview proved unusable, as the participant's responses were limited to single words or brief sentences, so I did not engage with it further. I also conducted two interviews with people working for the Hungarian state: the Diaspora Ambassador and the person in charge of a state-funded programme directed at young people. Unfortunately, such outreach was impossible on the Venezuelan side.

Given the volume of data, I initially transcribed only selected parts of the interviews. Later, while on a fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and

Ethnic Diversity in Germany, I gained access to a GWDG-provided transcription software that transcribed Hungarian and Spanish texts with 90-95% accuracy. The 1,325 pages of text I obtained complemented my 146 pages of fieldnotes. While I only took photos occasionally, I collected around 40 memes from social media platforms as they often expressed my participants' position regarding their home states excellently. I did not use any software to analyse my data, and I developed my chapters around patterns I identified while still in the field. In this, the monthly reports sent to my supervisors were pivotal. Furthermore, some chapters evolved in accordance with themes of conferences I attended: I initially tailored my material to match the call, in the process realising that the resulting output fit well with the aims of my dissertation.

If I had to pinpoint a single factor that facilitated my data collection, it would be 'luck' – though not understood as a synonym of random chance but according to the definition attributed to Seneca of 'luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity'. Psychologist Richard Wiseman's (2003) research identified that lucky people tend to cultivate certain habits, including practicing openness and alertness, upholding big social networks, and being in touch with their intuitions. These were all key features of my ethnography. I kept an open mind and embraced every opportunity that emerged, engaged with a wide range of people, and stayed attentive in all settings – not just to the outside world but also to processes taking place inside of me. This mindset paid off: I once spotted a key participant I had hoped to interview on the tube and ended up riding with him to the end of the line. Though he disliked the idea of a formal interview, he was happy to answer my questions in this informal, serendipitous context. At that moment, I knew I had successfully tamed the urban jungle of London.

Positionality

I have always believed that good research asks questions that are personally significant to the researcher, to sustain motivation and curiosity to continuously delve deeper. The research I present here is profoundly personal for several reasons. I was born and raised in Hungary but left at the age of 21 and have lived abroad since, in various places. As such, being a migrant and learning to restart life, often under less than favourable circumstances, is central to my identity. Even if – unlike many of my interlocutors – I did not migrate for political or economic reasons, but out of a desire to explore the world, the deterioration in the political and economic situation in Hungary has made the question of what it means to be Hungarian a leitmotiv of my life. As part of this process, a central theme has been navigating the inferiority complex I developed in relation to 'the West'. The gap first became visible for me when I left Hungary for an Erasmus year in Portugal, where Western European students were living the time of their lives free of financial constraints, while Eastern Europeans were struggling to make ends meet – asymmetries that revealed something deeper about the global order, which I felt inspired to explore.

The exact focus of my dissertation emerged out of personal experience as well. I first read about the Hungarian state's diaspora engagement in 2015, while working for the European Commission's European Youth Portal as a part-time journalist and translator to finance the Master's degree I had just started in Anthropology. As I skimmed through the article on Hungarian diaspora engagement I had been sent for translation, I felt an overwhelming range of emotions coming over me. It described people like me –

educated and mobile – as valuable assets the Hungarian state wanted to regain. The initiative fascinated and repelled me at the same time. Beyond my moral misgivings about its resemblance to missionary projects, I felt it was doomed for failure, rooted in the Hungarian state's inability to recognise how difficult it was for young people to establish themselves abroad. Yet, reading about the scheme that was described in opposition media as the 'most well-paid job for Hungarians' and sent people to far away corners of the world, I immediately wondered if I could apply. I knew I had to investigate the underlying processes further, so I picked the scheme as the topic of my upcoming course presentation. In the break, a classmate came up to me and said, *"I think you have found your topic!"*. I agreed. That was in 2015, but the topic has not ceased to intrigue me ever since.

During that degree, I used the 9 months designated for fieldwork to study changes in return intentions amongst Hungarian migrants in Dublin, Ireland in light of the facilitator's activity. My project deepened my interest in understanding the scheme from the inside, for which reason, in 2020, I took on employment as a diaspora facilitator and was delegated to Córdoba, Argentina. By the time I started my DPhil, I was well-acquainted with pertinent processes and would have concentrated my research on how Hungarians navigate belonging amid Brexit and Hungary's persistent homewards call, had my primary supervisor not encouraged me to broaden the project into a comparative one. If the Hungarian strand of my research stemmed from questions around my identity, the Venezuelan thread emerged from the encounter described in the Preface. The motivation and curiosity it sparked soon matched that evoked by the Hungarian component despite never having visited Venezuela, lacking prior ties to the country, and knowing very little about Venezuela's migration crisis before 2020.

Not everybody was convinced about my preparedness though. Early on, I contacted a prominent Venezuelan scholar working on the Venezuelan diaspora, who agreed to a call. He asked me if I or my supervisors had worked on Venezuela previously and when I said no, he suggested it was not a viable idea. Similarly, peers at Oxford working on similar topics warned me that due to their socioeconomic status, the Venezuelan migrants I would meet in the UK represented only a narrow segment of the Venezuelan society and I would never be able to understand the Venezuelan diaspora experience through them.

I did not dismiss such concerns. In an effort to expand my knowledge beyond the UK context, I took on an ESRC-funded collaborative placement with IOM's Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela, within the framework of which I was commissioned to conduct a qualitative research project with diaspora organisations in the Latin American and Caribbean region. Furthermore, I considered visiting Venezuela when a participant invited me to join a political tour she was organising to promote socialism. However, the University of Oxford made it clear that no permission would be granted due to the Foreign Office's ongoing travel warnings. Similar concerns prevented a short-term volunteer placement I proposed through a college scheme at a migrant shelter in Colombia.

It is also important to highlight that I did not have a direct path to Anthropology. My undergraduate degree was in Language Pedagogy, with a focus on English and Portuguese Studies. Although my academic focus later shifted, being a linguist and polyglot remains core to both my identity and ethnography. Initially, I was preparing for a career in journalism and worked in related part-time jobs for eight years, an

experience that helped me develop the skill of asking nuanced and challenging questions within ethical boundaries, which has been crucial to my ethnographic inquiry. For my first Master's, I transitioned to Cultural Studies. Although I no longer fully identify with the discipline's methods, this training has profoundly influenced my thinking and directed my attention to the role of visual and narrative culture, including art, film, and literature produced by migrants. Due to this background, my approach to Anthropology is Geertzian: I understand culture as a system of meanings, with my ethnographic method emphasising thick description and semiotic interpretation. While my interdisciplinary background has been an advantage, I was acutely aware of the gap left by not having studied anthropological theory from an undergraduate level. To address this, before applying for a doctoral degree, I used the opportunity provided by my two-year, research-focused Master's in Anthropology to take almost twice as many credits as required.

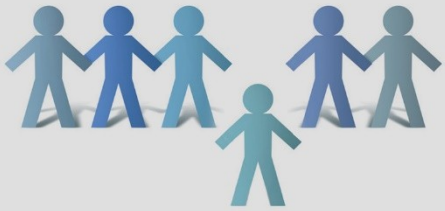
As Norman K. Denzin (1989) notes, "interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (p. 12). Therefore, it is important to address my position as parallelly an insider researcher in one community and an outsider ethnographer in the other as a factor that shaped the kind of data I was able to collect. My contrasting levels of embeddedness yielded strikingly different reception by my participants, especially in the initial stages of my research. I was made to feel part of the community of Venezuelans as soon as I entered the field, while it took me months to properly 'feel at home' amongst Hungarians. I remember being anxious turning up at my first Venezuelans event but as soon as I asked if I could help with decorations, I had already made five friends, who then later introduced me to dozens of others. Venezuelans instantly embraced my presence, viewing my lack of national connection

as confirmation that I was ‘safe’: I was treated as a neutral outsider, someone to whom immense gratitude was due for caring about Venezuelans’ strife and who would amplify the community’s experience to a broader audience. While this facilitated access and trust, it also came with pressures I found ethically troubling.

Amongst Hungarians, however, initial reactions were underwhelming. Some participants suggested that Hungarian migration was not as interesting as I thought and that it was already overstudied, a point that was reinforced when I had to ‘share’ one of my first field events with a sociologist from Hungary. I soon understood this resistance as being rooted in the amount of attention the state was dedicating to its diaspora. From retrospective remarks, I also know that some people were suspicious of my presence, thinking that I might be a spy of the Hungarian government. Initially, I tried to leverage my previous role as a diaspora facilitator strategically, aiming to navigate non-fixed aspects of my identity as proposed by Na’amah Razon and Karen Ross (2012). At events of Pannónika, I would deliberately mention my former position to build rapport while at InMpulse meetings, I framed it as something driven by academic curiosity. Notwithstanding, as my view of the Pannónika grew more nuanced and I understood it as a space of silent resistance, I realised that such disclosures may have inadvertently alienated people. Still, over time, persistence and transparency helped me earn Hungarians’ trust, which ultimately resulted in extremely rich data.

Below, I provide a visual illustration of my initial expectations regarding my place in the groups versus my actual experience. The first picture shows that in the Venezuelan community, I expected to be an awkwardly visible ‘other’ watching my participants from the outside, never achieving full immersion. However, it did not take long to be

assigned a central place in the community and be accepted as a ‘fellow citizen’. Conversely, due to my ethnic pertinence, I expected to blend in seamlessly with the Hungarian community. While Hungarians often felt like I was just a random attendee, making me acutely aware of the necessity to keep emphasising the reason for my presence, I often felt like an outsider as I was unable to identify with some dominant practices – more on this in Chapter 5.

	Expectation	Reality
Amongst Venezuelans		
Amongst Hungarians		

Picture 1. Expectations about my incorporation into the two groups versus reality.

The dichotomy between insider and outsider ethnography was also relevant to other aspects of my research. As Michael Moffat (1992) contends, “studying subjects relatively ‘like themselves’, local ethnographers may be more attuned to cultural nuances than far-from-home anthropologists, better able to draw on experiential understanding. They can often ‘blend in’ more completely – verbally, behaviourally, physically – possibly making for better rapport, possibly affecting who and what they

are studying less by their presence." (p. 206). However, as Rob van Ginkel (1994) argues, excessive familiarity with the culture of the group studied might hinder the perception of familiar patterns as well as curb cultural translation and limit possibilities for a reflexive stance. Moreover, as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) contends, the effects of the presence of a native and non-native anthropologist differ considerably, with people being less accepting of cultural clumsiness and non-pertinent questions from insiders.

Not being perceived as an insider by Venezuelans proved advantageous: my participants enjoyed sharing nostalgic accounts of their home country, explaining even self-evident facts in meticulous detail. They also insisted that I tell them about my own home country so they can measure the details against their reality, highlighting Mathijs Pelkmans's (2022) point that participants also compare as part of the research process. This mutual learning helped build connection and trust. It was exciting to try new food, customs, and practices previously unknown to me and it felt natural and widely accepted to make a fool of myself – for example, by overconsuming a highly laxative guanabana drink. Among Hungarians, by contrast, our shared cultural background enabled more immediate access to in-depth discussions without the need for extensive contextualisation. However, this also meant that my Hungarian informants would omit what they deemed 'obvious' and that implicit expectations around my cultural awareness and conduct were established.

Nonetheless, as David Mosse (2006) underlines, "an 'unbounding' of the field so as to include webs of regional and transnational connections and communities means that all anthropologists now research to some degree as 'insiders' or 'at home'" (p. 936). In my

fieldwork, I often found that nationality was not the primary determiner of connection. Instead, a deeper bond emerged from the shared experience of migration. This common ground fostered a sense of insider understanding that transcended cultural differences. At times, I felt a stronger affinity with elderly Venezuelan migrants than with Hungarians of my age who never left Hungary. This realisation underscored that the migration experience itself can be a basis for relational closeness, complicating simplistic insider-outsider binaries.

Still, the experiential texture of fieldwork differed markedly between the two groups. Although I was intellectually curious about Hungarian migration, immersing myself in the Hungarian community served as a constant reminder of the place and 'mentality' I chose not to return to. I also noticed that, on an emotional level, I was more open and forgiving towards my Venezuelan informants' political stances than Hungarians'. At the same time, despite the gravity of the stories I encountered, I never ceased to be amazed by the dignity, humour, and ethos of collective care with which Venezuelans faced their situation. Spending time with Venezuelans felt refreshing and they remain my lasting source of inspiration on how to navigate hardship.

Linguistic sensitivity, particularly attention to nuances emerging from word choice, has significantly shaped my analysis. As a native speaker of Hungarian, I was attuned to subtle linguistic deviations from standard usage that often signalled deeper social or political meanings. For example, many of my Hungarian interlocutors rejected the term migrant, not because they denied having migrated, but because the term had become heavily politicised under the Orbán government. What also made my research distinctive was that I was making a cultural and linguistic world I was deeply embedded

in intelligible for another milieu, in which I was fluent, but not a 'native speaker'. According to Peter van der Veer (2016), translating findings pertinent to non-Western groups into Western languages relying on Western frameworks is one of the most fundamental acts of comparison.

As for Spanish, just two and a half years before I began fieldwork, I only had rudimentary knowledge of the language. However, I hold an undergraduate degree in Portuguese Language Pedagogy and speak fluent Italian, which greatly facilitated my language learning when I was delegated to South America. Despite being based in Argentina, the lockdown meant that I acquired Spanish primarily in my pan-LatinX household, particularly from my Venezuelan flatmates, making Venezuelan Spanish the first variety I was exposed to. Upon beginning my doctoral programme, I enrolled in advanced Spanish courses at the University of Oxford's Language Centre, aiming to refine my grammar and accuracy. When I agreed to conduct a comparative project, I found it non-negotiable to enter the field with a proficient level of Spanish. Thanks to funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, I was also able to undertake intensive language training for three months in Spain, where I chose to live in a Colombian household to expose myself to the regional accent. I conducted all fieldwork in the original languages without interpreters, and all translations in this dissertation are my own.

The classic image of the ethnographer undergoing deep cultural immersion was complicated in my case by navigating two very different cultural frameworks simultaneously. For this reason, comparative study can be a way to prevent the perils of 'going native' in the field. Social norms often diverged starkly between the two groups.

For instance, I perceived contrasting expectations around punctuality: at Hungarian events, arriving late could mean not being allowed to enter, while at Venezuelan ones, I often found myself waiting alone for up to an hour before others began to arrive. Perceptions of reciprocity also differed markedly. Among Hungarians, interviews were generally viewed as one-time favours my participants granted me. In contrast, for my Venezuelan participants, the interview request fostered a sense of indebtedness on my part, which made my participants comfortable asking for various favours afterwards. This dynamic, and the ethical complexities it raised, is discussed further in the Ethical Considerations section.

One of the most central challenges I faced stemmed from the politics of who has the right to study whom. While my position as an expert on Hungarian migration was universally accepted, my authority on Venezuelan migration remained contested. At academic events, questions regarding Hungary were often directed at me whereas any discussion on Venezuelans would frequently be diverted to the nearest Venezuelan or South American attendee, irrespective of their research focus. This asymmetry in perceived legitimacy became particularly visible when I attempted to organise an academic conference on Venezuelan migration in Oxford. Although my proposal had received preliminary approval for funding, my perspectives on Venezuelan migration were often dismissed by Venezuelan or Latin American colleagues I selected for the organising committee – views that stemmed from the argument that I lacked the lived embeddedness they possessed. The obstacles I faced in assuming authority ultimately led me to abandon the project.

Similar tensions came to the fore in a particularly contentious incident towards the end of my fieldwork. I had registered to attend a Creative Writing workshop designed to explore linguistic hybridity among South American migrants. The workshop was led by a Venezuelan girl, who grew up in the United States, where she also studied Anthropology before dedicating herself to Literature. We had met on several occasions at Vínculos and had previously discussed my research, which she initially appeared to support. However, shortly after the workshop began, she pulled me aside and asked me to leave. She expressed that, upon further reflection, she felt discomfort at the thought of 'white and privileged colonisers' narrating the community's story and emphasised that Venezuelans had their own voice. She also argued that marginalised communities needed spaces of their own free from the gaze of those representing structures of historical oppression.

I never perceived this incident as a clash between a participant and myself but instead as an unfortunate manifestation of broader tensions in the academic landscape, and more specifically, clashing approaches to representation. The Venezuelan girl's disapproval of my presence highlighted a recurring dilemma I faced in my research: the challenges of occupying a complex positionality in environments where whiteness is frequently equated with both colonial complicity and epistemic illegitimacy. Although I was researching from a place of genuine care and commitment, gaining insights that those embedded in these communities might be blind to, these intentions were not always sufficient to secure acceptance. I found it highly paradoxical and disturbing that many of the same people who campaigned for inclusion and epistemic justice also acted fuelled by logics of exclusion.

As someone from Eastern Europe, I often felt caught in a liminal space, suffering from epistemic misrecognition. While unmistakably white-skinned, Eastern Europeans have historically existed in a semi-peripheral position, excluded from both the material prosperity of 'the West' and the political capital of postcolonial movements. However, in this particular incident, I found myself symbolically penalised for privileges I, or my compatriots, never fully possessed. In this sense, I experienced a double disadvantage: being marginalised in certain Western academic contexts due to my Eastern European background yet simultaneously being positioned as a symbol of white Western dominance in decolonial spaces.

Lastly, a significant factor shaping my positionality in the field was the role of the institutional affiliations I carried. My association with the University of Oxford introduced a complex layer of power dynamics that influenced how I was perceived. Amongst my Hungarian participants – many of whom came from backgrounds where education was highly valued – revealing my academic affiliation often shifted dynamics: I was no longer seen as one of the group but as someone exceptional, treated with undue reverence. Several participants articulated having feelings of inferiority or awe in relation to my presence, reflecting a post-socialist inferiority complex in relation to Western academia, which necessitated a careful negotiation of humility on my part.

Among Venezuelan participants, the reactions were more stratified. My middle- and upper-class interlocutors, many of whom had attended prestigious universities themselves, often in the US, were largely unfazed by my affiliation. Nonetheless, my status as an Oxford researcher projected me as a potential spokesperson; someone with access to structures to facilitate raising awareness about Venezuelans' struggles for a

global audience. My working-class Venezuelan interlocutors were equally unimpressed, which may have been due to a deep disillusionment with academic institutions, shaped by their own experiences of educational devaluation in the UK. I was also unaware that Oxford was perceived as a class marker, which became particularly evident during an event organised by VeNidito. When a participant asked me what I thought of Oxford, I casually mentioned that I disliked the elitism I encountered at the institution. A woman seated nearby responded, *"Oh, I have actually just finished an MBA there!"*, making it clear that I had inadvertently underestimated the social capital Oxford held for them.

On a practical level, my participation in fieldwork was significantly shaped by funding constraints. I consider myself fortunate to have received research support through the ESRC. Yet, as I did not leave the UK, I was only eligible for the Research Training Support Grant rather than a traditional fieldwork stipend, which placed several bureaucratic restrictions on expenditures. I was not permitted to purchase season tickets for public transportation and was required to submit receipts for each individual journey, along with justifications, which, due to the fact that I undertook multiple trips daily, posed a massive workload. Initially, I was even asked to provide the names of interviewees corresponding to each receipt, which raised concerns around anonymity. Moreover, many ethnographic interactions took place in informal, semi-official venues, where itemised receipts were not available, making reimbursement impossible. In some cases, such as the biweekly Hungarian mass, entry was technically free, but a donation was requested, which again could not be reimbursed. Additionally, social norms often required small gifts or contributions when invited to private gatherings, which were again non-reimbursable.

Housing presented the most significant financial challenge. While doctoral students based in London are eligible for a ‘cost-of-living supplement’, I did not qualify for this during my fieldwork. After my initial sublet ended, I entered a period of housing instability and even considered commuting from Oxford. This precarious situation inadvertently deepened my understanding of the lived realities of my lower- and middle-class participants. I will never forget attending the VeneHelp Christmas party hosted in a luxury apartment, coming directly from my shift at the marketplace, getting changed in the staff toilet, and bartering a cake against my lunch allowances to bring as a present. Upon arrival, I apologised to the host for my simple dress, admiring her sequined gown. When she responded, *“I did tell you this was a dress-up occasion!”*, I was forced to admit that I simply did not own anything comparable.

Ironically, this economic disadvantage sometimes worked in my favour. Unable to secure housing for a few weeks, I was invited by two of my participants to spend time with them, which allowed for an extended period of immersive participant observation and generated many candid, in-depth conversations. One participant even invited me to spend Christmas with her and her husband when she learned that I could not travel home due to an unexpected situation. These instances highlight how vulnerability, when ethically navigated, can become a source of relational depth.

My fieldwork demanded a significant degree of ‘emotional labour’, a concept most famously articulated by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983), who explains it as the effort required to manage and sustain emotional engagement in the context of work, including performing empathy, affective attunement, and emotional self-regulation in the face of challenging interactions. In the context of ethnographic research, I argue that this

emotional labour often includes managing the psychological toll of bearing witness to suffering, injustice, and complex interpersonal dynamics, all of which were present in the field. At times, I perceived fieldwork as a space where participants could offload their grief, frustrations, and political disillusionment for me to adopt them. The fieldwork process left little room for my own emotions: what was expected of me was an emotionally well-balanced and neutral presence – someone who offers, rather than receives support. I recognised this asymmetry as emotionally taxing but never gave it the attention it deserved until, late in my DPhil journey, I attended a workshop on vicarious trauma, which I found profoundly transformative. The workshop provided a conceptual and practical toolkit for recognising and managing the secondary effects of prolonged exposure to others' trauma narratives, which, I firmly believe, should be made a compulsory part of any preparatory training for conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

In retrospect, I view the fieldwork period not only as a time of data collection but as a deeply formative personal journey. Beyond acquiring empirical knowledge, I developed a range of valuable soft skills: my networking abilities developed, my adaptability improved, and I became increasingly cognisant of my own boundaries, energy levels, and emotional responses. My involvement in the Latin American theatre group rekindled my passion for improv performance, which, in turn, enhanced my improvisational capacities in field settings. I also became more attuned to the visceral effects of listening to certain types of stories. The outcome of what feminist scholars might describe as 'embodied listening' (Behar, 1996; García-González *et al.*, 2021) offered important data in itself. During the writing-up phase, I enrolled in a Mindfulness course, which helped me better recognise such responses. It also opened my eyes to how

certain Mindfulness techniques, like deep observation, reflexivity, and intentional presence mirror the tools of anthropologists. This recognition highlighted how ethnography, at its best, fosters a mode of deep, attentive engagement with the world – one that stands in quiet resistance to the hyper-accelerated, often superficial rhythms of contemporary life.

Ethical considerations

As Denzin (2014) aptly observes, "writing is not an innocent practice, it is a form of pedagogy, a way of making the world visible" (p. 569). This assertion underscores the ethical responsibilities that accompany ethnographic research, particularly when such research involves rendering public the lives, perspectives, and practices of individuals situated within precarious social settings. Migration is not a neutral object of study as it is constructed through pre-existing categories, often rooted in policy. Terms such as EU migrant, ancestral citizenship, or diasporic subject carry epistemic weight, political implications, and might reinforce hierarchies of being. Thus, the challenge lies in capturing lived experience without reifying ontological insecurities.

In my case, this responsibility was compounded by an uncomfortable question: who will benefit from my research? Since I first embarked on the study of diaspora engagement, I have been painfully aware that my output's immediate utility lies not necessarily with the communities involved, but with the states that propose outreach initiatives. It is these actors who are most likely to seek its results in order to understand their target populations' behaviour and thereby refine their strategies. While I do not consider this a significant concern in the case of the Venezuelan government, given its ongoing

reluctance to engage constructively with its westbound emigrant population, the same cannot be said about the Hungarian government. Their investment in diaspora policy has been sustained, strategic, and reliant on best practices, for which reason they might find my insights particularly instructive. This tension, while unresolved, remained a constant touchstone as I navigated my research.

My project gained ethical approval in May 2022, and all fieldwork activities were conducted in full compliance with the approved protocols. The safety and well-being of participants remained a constant priority, and this commitment informed the boundaries I established around research design and participant selection. In order to minimise the risk of harm, I chose to engage exclusively with individuals who held legal immigration status in the United Kingdom. I excluded asylum seekers and undocumented migrants from my study not because their perspectives were irrelevant but because their inclusion would have introduced additional ethical complexities and potential risks that could not be adequately mitigated.

Children were often present at the events I attended. However, in keeping with the ethical guidelines of CUREC 1, my focus remained firmly on the adults present: I conducted no interviews with minors and excluded them from fieldnotes. In all research settings, I made consistent effort to clarify my role as a researcher as well as the purpose of my presence. This was particularly important in the Hungarian context, where my attendance could easily have been mistaken for a compatriot's. My approach to visual data collection was similarly cautious. Photographs were taken sparingly and only when consent was clearly granted, either by individuals appearing in the image or by those responsible for the artefact being documented. The only exception constituted large

public events, where consent from every individual was impossible to obtain and was sought from the organisers instead. Nonetheless, with every picture taken, I edited images to blur faces, thereby protecting anonymity.

Similar principles guided my approach to interviews. Prior to each interview, I explained the aims of my research in detail and provided participants with an information sheet in their native language, whose English copy I included in the 'Appendix'. I duly responded to any questions or concerns informants raised and obtained either written or verbal consent, depending on preference, also in the participants' mother tongue. Interlocutors were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that no remuneration would be provided. I also made clear that all data would be anonymised using pseudonyms and that personal details leading to identification would be removed. Nonetheless, I was conscious that in close-knit diasporic communities, complete anonymity could not always be guaranteed and discussed this with participants, especially in cases where their distinctive roles could make them recognisable despite pseudonymisation. While several participants expressed being comfortable featuring in my research under their own names, I ultimately chose to decline these offers to maintain a consistent ethical standard of protection for all.

Keeping their comfort and convenience in mind, I always gave participants the option to choose the interview format and location. Many of them preferred online interviews to minimise travel and time investment, which I happily accommodated. When participants opted for in-person interviews, I invited them to select a café and offered to cover the cost of refreshments. This was slightly problematic as cafés would normally

close by the time my informants finished work and the Economic and Social Research Council discouraged conducting interviews at pubs, for which reason I tried to schedule most interviews during weekends. On one occasion, a participant proposed a rather expensive restaurant after I mentioned that refreshments would be my treat. Concerned about profiteering, I tactfully suggested an alternative venue. For participants worried about Covid, I offered outdoor venues as an option. One couple asked me if we could do the interview on a park bench, which I initially thought was due to Covid precautions. I only understood upon arrival that the choice stemmed from financial constraints. I immediately clarified that covering the cost of refreshments was standard practice in my discipline and improvised a suitable place nearby. These negotiations, while seemingly minor, reflected my deep commitment to mutual respect.

On several occasions, participants invited me into their homes, generously offering me meals and refreshments. One participant requested for the interview to take place in her home due to childcare responsibilities but prepared a feast to thank me for my flexibility and apologise for what she thought was an inconvenience. In the spirit of reciprocity, I extended similar invitations when appropriate, hosting participants in the kitchen area of my shared house – but never in my room – offering home-cooked meals.

Whenever possible, I conducted interviews in the participant's native language, recognising that this enhanced comfort, clarity, and depth of expression. All interviews with Hungarian participants were conducted in Hungarian. Some Venezuelan participants, however, chose to do their interviews in English to create a more equitable interaction. I respected these choices even if I did not necessarily agree with them. With the exception of one interview conducted with a Hungarian government official, during which I was

only permitted to take notes, all interviews were audio-recorded. Recordings were pseudonymised and stored securely in compliance with university data protection protocols.

The divergence in attitudes towards the topic of my interviews proved qualitatively striking. For my Venezuelan participants, the subjects I asked about seemed deeply embedded in daily conversations and reflected ongoing concerns they sought opportunities to explore. In contrast, my Hungarian informants were often hesitant about my invitation for an interview, not because they were opposed to it in any way, but because they struggled to self-identify as a migrant, citing their long residence in the UK and legal migration pathways as grounds to distance themselves from this word. Others distinguished themselves from what they described as the 'stereotypical Hungarian migrant' – a profile they saw as being characterised by migrating for economic reasons with firm intentions to return.

Despite this initial reluctance, once the interviews commenced, Hungarian participants fully embraced the opportunity to reflect on their experience. Several informants described the process as therapeutic, revealing that they had seldom spoken at length about their migrant identities. Notably, two participants requested to continue the conversation after the formal interview had concluded, expressing a desire to engage further with these reflections. One participant, who had been living in the UK for over a decade, remarked that he welcomed the rare moment of introspection, as *"Once you migrate, you become so focused on making it all work that you never really ask yourself again if it is still worth it."* Intriguingly, a few months later, he contacted me to say that

he was moving on to the Middle East, which decision I suspect to have at least partially resulted from the thought processes sparked by our interview.

Conversely, Venezuelan participants often conveyed narratives marked by unresolved distress, ambivalence about the decision to migrate, and uncertainty regarding the future. Many of my female informants would burst into tears during the interview and two of my participants reported having nightmares the night after our conversation. While this deeply concerned me, both of them assured me that they understood it as being part of their healing process and only shared it in case it was useful for my analysis. Many Venezuelan participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be heard, noting that the experience was empowering. My overall impression in both groups was that people truly valued the chance to share their stories, which signals how, in today's fast-paced world, this basic human need remains unfulfilled for many, especially those uprooted from their usual support networks.

The ethical dilemmas I faced primarily concerned the Venezuelan side of my research and predominantly revolved around power. Conditions at the Venezuelan food business were often substandard. Although my bosses treated me relatively well due to my researcher status, I often experienced the oppressive structures affecting others. About seven months into the job, I discovered that the pension contributions deducted from our salaries were never paid into any pension scheme. It could easily go unnoticed by newly arrived migrants, who often struggled with language barriers and unfamiliarity with the British system, allowing abuse to prevail unchallenged. I had two choices: remain silent out of gratitude for being allowed to gather data at the business or speak up in the interest of my participants. I opted for the latter. While this decision strained

my relationship with my employers to the point that I ultimately decided not to approach them for interviews, I am aware that raising the issue had positively impacted the financial situation of many.

I also understood that, culturally, it is not always appropriate to engage with everyone. One incident involved an elderly widower who had attended my English classes. After conducting an online interview with him, he insisted on bringing the signed consent form to the marketplace, explaining that he was curious to see the Venezuelan food stall. When he arrived just before closing time, I welcomed him and offered him an arepa, but the visit was cut short as I had to rush to a room viewing. He was eager to let me try some authentic home-cooked Venezuelan food at his house, which he shared with his three daughters, their spouses, and children. However, upon my arrival, I immediately sensed unease as one of his daughters made remarks implying that I was romantically involved with her father, an interpretation that was reinforced when he walked me to the bus stop. Deeply uncomfortable, I chose to end contact, just as I would have if he had not been a research participant. While my role as a researcher required openness, this was a moment when my ethical responsibility lay not in extending a relationship, but in recognising the need to withdraw from it.

Throughout the research, my primary commitment was to my participants, often prioritising their well-being over my own. As Matthew Archer and Daniel Souleles (2021) also critique, anthropological literature tends to frame participants as powerless subjects who are vulnerable to exploitation by researchers. However, my experience revealed a more complex dynamic in which participants exercised significant agency over my involvement. From the outset, Venezuelans embraced me as the proclaimed

voice of their community, a role that I found problematic for its connotations of militant anthropology and its potential to undermine trust among my Chavista participants. Although I explained the limits of academic impact multiple times, the expectations would always resurface.

These power dynamics became the most apparent as I was preparing to exit the field. Weeks before my departure, Alejandra, the founder of VeneHelp, unexpectedly contacted me, insisting on discussing how many articles I would contribute to their LinkedIn channel monthly to support their advocacy with scientific evidence drawn from my research. This demand emerged out of the blue: I had never agreed to such commitments, nor had she mentioned anything about them before. I explained that I needed to prioritise my dissertation and could not take on additional work, adding that publishing the type of articles she requested might compromise my academic integrity. Despite my explicit refusal and a later statement that my supervisor was not in agreement with such activities, she persisted. The final event of my fieldwork was a VeneHelp garden party at her countryside mansion, where, during our farewell, she reiterated the importance of these articles and asked me to promise to start producing them soon. After having enjoyed her hospitality, this put me in an uncomfortable position, but I stood my ground, nonetheless.

Reflecting anthropologically on this incident, I understood that for Alejandra and her organisation, my initial request to study them locked me into a complex web of reciprocity, one that extended beyond the formal fieldwork period. They viewed it as natural to request favours in exchange for their collaboration. In contrast, I approached fieldwork as an engagement for a finite period, expecting ties to gradually diminish after

data collection ended. During my time with the organisation, I sought to reciprocate as much as possible. I volunteered at fundraising events, contributed to VeneHelp's collaboration with IOM on a pro bono basis, and took on minor roles in the organisation's online meetings, such as timekeeping. This was motivated both by my moral stance and a desire to counterbalance anthropology's often-criticised reputation as an extractive discipline.

When I wrote to Alejandra to explain that I would not be able to contribute the articles she requested, I framed my decision carefully. I let her know that I was overwhelmed with the demands of my dissertation, but I remained committed to supporting Venezuela's future in other ways: I told her about my upcoming internship with IOM and took the opportunity to share that as part of our annual fundraiser, my college had collected around £200 for VeneHelp again. Her response made it clear that I had let her down and that she did not wish to stay in contact. While I firmly believe that it was necessary to draw boundaries to avoid being manipulated, this made me uneasy as I became growingly concerned that she might attempt to withdraw her own or her organisation's participation from my research. In retrospect, I recognise that allowing participants to withdraw from the research at any point before submission, though guided by goodwill, placed considerable power in my informants' hands and left me vulnerable. While my fears were ultimately unfounded, the experience taught me that ethical research is not just about protecting participants but also about protecting oneself.

When navigating ethical dilemmas, I found it particularly useful to engage with David Mosse's (2006) reflections on the complexities of conducting fieldwork in humanitarian

contexts. Much of my experience resonates with what he describes as the inherent difficulty of 'exit': he blames anthropology's recent shift towards closer relations in the field as well as long-term and insider research for making exit harder than entry. As he insightfully explains: "As researchers, we resolved the intractable problems of access to closed organizational worlds through membership of the communities we ended up studying. But in doing so we substituted a set of boundaries that kept us out (the problem of access) with another set that kept us in." (p. 936). While I saw myself as a researcher with clear temporal and ethical boundaries, my informants viewed me as someone embedded in a reciprocal relationship that extended beyond the scope of my project.

As Mosse elaborates, the very closeness that enables deep immersion in the field complicates the process of exit. In my case, the same relationships that had enabled my research to unfold smoothly and without considerable effort eventually made disengagement emotionally fraught. This had both positive and negative implications: when two years after leaving the field, I shared a meme on social media communicating concerns about my future, I received a personal message from a Venezuelan participant, reassuring me by saying that I forever have a place with the community of Venezuelans, implying that the bond created during fieldwork was ongoing. However, in this context, saying no risked being interpreted as personal betrayal, which was compounded by the fact that Anthropology, as a discipline, often lacks a clear script for what researchers owe their participants beyond the field. Mosse continues: "as other boundaries fade, it is often the detachment of writing itself that has become the primary mode of exit" (p. 937). In my case, writing helped me re-establish the scholarly distance in a context

where the moral economy of gratitude had begun to undermine my capacity to define the terms of my engagement.

However, this posed another ethical dilemma. Initially, I had intended to share my findings with participants and seek their feedback during the writing process. However, as I began drafting my dissertation, I became increasingly aware that not all research can accommodate such processes. I recall Alejandra once telling me that she did not mind if I challenged VeneHelp as due to their emotional investment, they were biased, and it was useful to be shaken out of fossilised beliefs through new perspectives. Yet, as I progressed in my analysis, I realised that anthropological writing is rarely received as neutrally as intended. Much of my work analyses how certain narratives emerge, which often involves interpreting subconscious patterns or implicit assumptions that participants may not themselves be aware of. This form of analysis, while always grounded in what participants told me or what I observed, runs the risk of being perceived as intrusive or even threatening, particularly when it touches on identities and beliefs that participants consider foundational.

For instance, in Chapter 5, I explore how one of my most fervent Chavista informants came to align with the ideology, suggesting a developmental trajectory rather than a fixed, lifelong identity. While my interpretation is based entirely on her own accounts and behaviour in the field, I am aware that she might prefer to be represented as someone who has never questioned her political convictions. On the Hungarian side, participants might be equally uncomfortable being depicted as constantly navigating state engagement for their own benefits or InMpulse, an important opposition group, as being predominantly apolitical. While it might be perceived as denouncing uncompliant

behaviour, analysing these processes was fundamental to understanding state-emigrant relations. In my opinion, few participants understand that the anthropologist's role is not to judge or impose meaning, but to uncover the layers of experience that shape how people see the world around them and their role in it. This is why I believe that self-representation, while crucial, is not sufficient. While I would never go so far as to publish an account that could destabilise a community, as has been critiqued in relation to the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2000; 2001), I also firmly believe that the role of the anthropologist is not merely to affirm participants' views, but to engage with them critically.

Much of this experience is a small-scale representation of the reason for which Mosse (2006) describes ethnography as 'anti-social'. As he writes, "ethnographic writing breaks fieldwork relations, cuts the network, and erects boundaries" (p. 935). He argues that in many ways, anthropologists are now far closer to their 'others' than in earlier ethnographic traditions and the writing desk is no longer a private, detached space: "the detachment of writing is now socially experienced by others" (p. 937). Anthropologists work surrounded by those portrayed, who may "raise objections, make new demands to negotiate public and published interpretations" (p. 937). They may feel objectified or misrepresented, especially if ethnographic accounts move beyond what was explicitly articulated in the field. This is particularly fraught when anthropologists investigate organisations, where the risks extend beyond personal discomfort to potential reputational damage. As Mosse sums up, "the relationships of the field persist, the capacity to exit through writing is in question, and ethnographic representations have become unavoidably part of the world that is studied" (p. 937). In my own research, I came to the conclusion that while sharing findings is important, the benefits of receiving

feedback must be carefully weighed against the risk of compromising analytical integrity on the altar of approval-seeking.

Throughout this research, ethical practice was not approached as a fixed checklist of institutional obligations but as a dynamic, relational, and often unpredictable process. Ethical decisions had to be made and re-made daily in response to the shifting conditions of fieldwork, especially the complexities of cross-cultural interaction, the evolving expectations of participants, and the personal dilemmas that emerged around power, reciprocity, and representation. Beyond simply ensuring compliance, I sought to cultivate an ethical stance grounded in attentiveness to context, reflexivity about my own position, and accountability to the people who made my research possible. This entailed acknowledging moments of discomfort and contradiction, accepting that goodwill alone could not resolve all dilemmas, and that not all tension in the field is for the ethnographer to ease. Ultimately, I came to understand ethics as an ongoing mode of engagement – one that demands humility, clarity, but also a commitment of care towards others and one's own self.

Chapter 2 – Embracing migration

Introduction

"Migration is one of the hardest things I have ever had to live" – was the first thing Claudio told me after joining my English classes. Once a successful businessman in Venezuela, in the UK, he found himself working as a supermarket shelf-stocker, a role he would have never accepted back home. Inspired by the stories of his parents, who had migrated from Italy and Spain at the age of 14 and built prosperous lives in Venezuela, Claudio expected to reach stability through rapid language acquisition, state support, and ample job opportunities. Despite believing that the most affluent countries were helped by migrants and that therefore, they deserved to be valued by states, his own reality was jarring. From a beachfront home in Venezuela, Claudio moved into a house shared with low-income migrants from Poland and Romania. Nonetheless, what bothered him the most was the absence of certain welfare measures: *"If you get sick, you don't earn. Or you earn so little it doesn't cover your costs. […] This feels comical to me!"* – he explained, highlighting that in Venezuela, social security would fully cover salaries. This experience made Claudio turn inwards, ultimately creating a house-share with compatriots – a domestic space governed by 'Venezuelan rules'.

As Claudio's story illustrates, what people think they do when they migrate is deeply rooted in where they have come from, where they fit into the new space, and how they handle the situation when dreams do not materialise. While Venezuelans rarely desired migration, once it was perceived as unavoidable, they approached the project with optimism, focusing on its redemptive potential. Yet aspirations were often met with disillusionment in the UK, where material goals and status proved difficult to achieve

due to language barriers, racial discrimination, and mismatched expectations around work. Hungarian migrants, by contrast, tended to hold more cautious expectations rooted in the moralising discourse of Hungary's nationalist regime and socialisation into immobility during socialism. Many of my informants shared initial fears rooted in dissident relatives becoming socially isolated and immigrant friends fighting exclusion in Hungary. Nevertheless, they mostly reported overall satisfaction in the UK. I thus argue that the interpretive frames migrants use to explain the disjuncture between expectations and lived experience cannot be understood without exploring the promises embedded in capitalism, socialism, and nationalism.

According to Abdelmalek Sayad (2010), "to think about migration is always to think about the state, and more precisely it is to think about the state that thinks about migration" (p. 165). As John Torpey (2000) asserts, absolute freedom of movement remains a theoretical abstraction, unattainable in practice, as mobility is inherently constrained by external factors. Chief amongst these is the state, which plays a dual role: it offers the infrastructure that makes movement feasible, while simultaneously devising policies that regulate and restrict it. States administer migration through migration regimes, which Christoph Rass and Frank Wolff (2018) define as the concept that concerns the interconnectedness of mobility, regulation, and discourse. Migration regimes reflect state ideologies about how states see themselves in relation to their citizens and how they constitute themselves through migration. These ideas form the basis of what messages they communicate to those who want to enter or leave.

In their analysis of 'communist' and 'post-communist' Europe, Libora Oates-Indruchová and Wolfgang Mueller (2017) explain the rationale behind divergent

bordering practices by claiming that while ‘non-communist’ “barriers are mostly erected with the aim of preventing foreigners from coming in, communist borders were designed to hinder their own population from running away” (p. 230). Hungary, once a closed state that restricted both immigration and emigration, transitioned to democracy and later gained EU membership, obliging it to guarantee the freedom of movement. In contrast, Venezuela, for most of its history a country of significant immigration but minimal outmigration, now hinders citizens’ ability to leave, especially westwards. Nonetheless, when migrating, people do not only navigate legal systems: they also carry with them frameworks of meaning that shape expectations about what kind of migrants they should aspire to be, often rooted in home state narratives. This is the focus of the first two sections of this chapter: how emigration and immigration regimes, as experienced in the country of origin, shape individuals’ attitudes toward their migration projects.

A pertinent issue, explored in depth in the third section, is how emerging imaginaries of ‘the West’ shape migrants’ expectations. For both groups, migration to the UK constitutes a westward move ideologically, driven by visions of personal freedom and modernity. These images often carry the assumption that relocating to a politically more liberal environment will naturally result in an improved quality of life. Yet, access to the perceived promises of ‘the West’ is unequally distributed. Various factors such as race, gender, linguistic heritage, and legal status play a role in determining who can fully benefit from its perceived privileges. For some, ‘the myth of the West’ is realised whereas for others, it remains out of reach, dissolving into a limbo of unfulfilled desires. I examine the clash between anticipated and lived experiences, focusing on how different migrant profiles can either enable or obstruct access to aspired futures.

Nonetheless, migrants do not only carry disillusionment: residual practices migrate with them, emerging in the new context even when the political frameworks that once legitimated them are rejected. These are not ideologically coherent actions but more akin to hauntings: fragments of once-lived systems that reappear in response to the unmet promises of economic mobility. This suggests that ideologies are not confined to the political arena but also generate structures that shape the contours of everyday life. In both Venezuela's and Hungary's case, socialism, whether as a system or its collapse and consequences, serves as a crucial ideological backdrop for emigration. However, in the migratory process, socialist and post-socialist experiences are reframed as practical assets, conferring an advantage in navigating capitalist environments, often in contrast to the local population.

In the final section of this chapter, I trace how certain practices associated with socialism resurface as forms of resilience. I examine the contradictions that emerge when migrants aspire to a capitalist dream yet scaffold it through embodied habits and social logics forged under previous regimes, thereby espousing one ideology while enacting another. What emerges is a picture of migrants not merely moving across physical borders but traversing ideological systems between discredited pasts and uncertain futures, between state abandonment and the construction of self-reliance. I argue that ideologies are left behind but not forgotten; they persist to shape expectations and offer strategies of survival when expectations remain unmet.

Immigration regimes

"*Hallaca making was never really a thing in my family*" – started Flavia. "*For us, it was always Basque dishes for Christmas.*" Raised by an immigrant mother, she was accustomed to doing things differently. Flavia's mother fled Franco's regime as an adolescent. Thus, when prompted by Venezuela's crisis, everybody began obsessively studying family trees to spot foreign relatives to qualify for European citizenship, Flavia was certain she only needed to get her to reactivate her Spanish citizenship. Much to her surprise though, her mother refused her request: she argued that while her Spanish identity was randomly assigned to her, she became Venezuelan by choice, reinforcing an understanding of migration as not just escape, but redemption. Growing up with such narratives, Flavia saw migration as the normative script of progress and ultimately chose to pursue the difficult path of work visas. It was not despite her mother's story of thriving in Venezuela that Flavia left, but exactly because of it: it gave her faith that migration could transform the destiny her country had assigned to her.

In my research, a salient pattern emerged: people with family histories of migration held more positive attitudes to migration and often migrated sooner. Previous studies have identified a link between family histories of migration and migration considerations (Kandel and Massey, 2002; Ivlevs and King, 2012; Clifton-Sprigg, 2022) as well as the act of migration (Massey and Espinosa, 1997; Francisco-Menchavez, 2020). Relying on the concept of 'migration-specific capital' (Deléchat, 2001), Petra de Jong and Helga de Valk (2022) argue that migration-acquired skills, like other forms of social capital, can be passed down across generations. As they suggest, migrants develop technical and cognitive skills that enable them to cross borders again and do so more efficiently. This 'mobility capital' is then transmitted to children, thereby increasing the likelihood of migration in the next generation.

While de Jong and de Valk focus on practical skills, I argue that migration is also a narrative inheritance. Amongst my Venezuelan participants, family stories of immigration passed down across generations constituted a moral compass about resilience, especially in times of crisis, with many sharing over-romanticised accounts of relatives fleeing war, conflict, or persecution in Europe and building idyllic lives in Venezuela. Esteban and his wife migrated to London in their 60s. While they emphasised migration as a hard decision after having built successful careers and a comfortable home in Venezuela, Esteban found inspiration in the story of his great uncle who turned his destiny around after escaping the horrors of war in Hungary: "*Together with some members of his family, they got on a boat to Brazil, which, upon reaching the American continent, made several stops along the coast. Once the boat stopped in Venezuela, they were given some hours to walk around. But my great uncle, who was only 15 at the time, was so mesmerised by Venezuela that he forgot about the time and by the time he returned, the boat had already sailed away.*" The story goes that despite being separated from his family and not speaking the language, he found work as a handyman, which led to a career in engineering. His happiness became complete when a Venezuelan girl chased him down the street, whom he soon married, had children with, and lived with happily ever after. Such accounts functioned not merely as family stories but as 'migration myths'. Told in the fashion of a heroic quest, with departure, trial, triumph, and transformation as key elements, they gave my informants hope that once challenges were overcome, a bright future awaited.

Ignacio's father had once departed the Canary Islands, and decades later, Ignacio took his own family back there, before eventually relocating to Britain. This return gave Ignacio an eerie sense of having reversed history and brought things full circle. Yet, he

was quick to challenge the idea of any finality in such movements. Centring his rationale around the unpredictability of global events, he reflected on how Europe, often regarded as a haven of stability, had been torn by war only half a century earlier, with Venezuela offering refuge to Europeans. He explained that major crises were bound to emerge periodically in every part of the world, and the individual's task was to move in accordance with them. Currently, it was Venezuela's turn to experience a crisis, but nobody knew what the future held and whether the next generation would not need to move back.

This approach is echoed by the study of Mónika Szente-Varga and Amadea Bata-Balog (2021), who emphasise that for many Venezuelans, "the move to the old continent is only part of the migratory process that will continue in the future with the change of circumstances" (p. 92). When I asked Ignacio what it meant for him to be a migrant in the UK, he explained that since it was his 'family heritance', migration was what he was destined to do: *"practically, for me, it does not mean anything because I come from a family of migrants in Venezuela. I was an immigrant, and I keep being an immigrant. I arrived, but I don't know where I will end up. Maybe I will keep climbing the stairs and I will reach the North of Finland. Then I will head on to Iceland and from there, reach the North Pole."* Although he had no concrete intention of moving further, the cosmology of perpetual migration and 'postnational' belonging (Appadurai, 1996; Mandaville, 2002), shaped by his identity as the son of migrants imbued Ignacio's experience with meaning and rendered the transition narratively less difficult.

The perspective of migration looked notably different for Venezuelans without a direct migratory heritage. The only migrants Graciela could identify amongst her ancestors

were Spanish from the time of the colonisation, who mixed with indigenous locals. She reflected on her migration in terms of her betrayal of family continuity: "*Many times I think of my father when I think of my grandchildren, that yes, OK, they will know which one is the Venezuelan flag, more or less they know where Caracas or Maracaibo is, but in fact they don't really know much. And what they know they know from us. And I think of my father, who was really Venezuelan, and my grandfather. It is a pain that this is now lost.*" Similarly, Miguel, who identified as 'pure Venezuelan' on both sides of his family linked migration to a loss of rootedness: "*I never thought that I would leave Venezuela. Never. When my wife told me let's go, let's go! Look – I told her – I am like a sabanero, which is a tree in Venezuela whose roots are so big that it is ingrained in the soil. […] From here, nobody moves me!*"

Nonetheless, Venezuela's historic role as a reception country of migrants has significantly influenced Venezuelans' perceptions of migration. According to Sebastian Huhn (2020), after the independence movement, in an effort to 'whiten' the multiracial population, Venezuela introduced a policy to populate its land with European agricultural workers. However, these early efforts were largely unsuccessful, and a significant influx only started in the aftermath of World War II. The establishment of the International Refugee Organization in 1946 facilitated aid for European refugees, making migration to Venezuela more accessible. Under the legal protection of General Pérez Jiménez's open-door policy, approximately two million Europeans settled in the country between the late 1940s and early 1960s. This legacy is reflected in the 2011 census, which reports that 51.6% of the population identifies as mestizo and 46.6% claims to have European ancestry (Censos de Población y Vivienda, 2011). Venezuela's emergence as a migrant destination is also closely linked to the development of its oil industry from the 1920s,

which generated a demand for labour. As a result, it became home to a significant number of migrants from South America and the Caribbean region escaping economic hardship, dictatorships, or guerrillas (European Parliament Report, 2018). Immigration from neighbouring countries remained framed through brotherhood, solidarity, and inclusion throughout Chávez's socialism.

Consequently, nearly all my Venezuelan informants celebrated, and thereby normalised, ethnic and cultural diversity. As Carmen explained, *"I never saw anyone as a stranger because the bakery was always run by the Portuguese, the shoemaker was Colombian, the restaurant belonged to the Arab guy... I mean, I would say to myself, 'these people come from another country' but I never felt they were outsiders, because I always knew people – generally really good people – who were working and creating jobs, and we all grew together."* Migrants were also seen as a source of inspiration, as described by Isabel: "*I had a very beautiful image of migrants. […] The migrant in Venezuela was somebody who worked and then achieved this high economic status, so they were like examples for us."* Hence, Claudio was convinced that migrants were crucial for any country's future: "*The migrant always contributes. And I am not just saying this because I am a migrant now. But when I was living in Venezuela, I always thought that those who worked the most were the migrants. And those who have the most money in Venezuela, thanks to their factories and so on, are children and nephews of migrants. So, they grew. They arrived with nothing and grew."*

Beyond shaping imaginaries of what migration entails, memories of growing up alongside migrants offered Venezuelans a form of solace, anchoring their own dislocation in a perpetual collective experience. For some, witnessing the early struggles

of migrant families in Venezuela became a reference point that allowed them to make sense of their own loss. As Romina described,

> *I had two years of fight. Of sadness. […] Losing my house was horrible. The house for which we fought so much, my husband and I. I don't have it anymore. I gave everything away. I gifted everything that was inside my house. My ornaments. My Bohemian crystals. All the beautiful things I had. I gave it all away. And it hurts a lot. But I have come to terms with it. I look at it as something that life gave me. It gave it to me like to all the people whom I was used to seeing when I was a little girl.*

Romina's account reflects how, even in profound grief, the memory of others' battles provided a framework of meaning. As Veena Das (2007) argues in her work on the everyday life of trauma, societies absorb violence into daily life: instead of grand gestures, suffering is often processed through ordinary acts of comparison. For Romina, recalling migrants' stories from her childhood allowed her to place her own pain within a shared landscape of human resilience.

Unlike my Venezuelan informants, none of my Hungarian participants were aware of any foreign ancestry. This surprised me, given Hungary's historical role as a transit zone. According to Boldizsár Nagy (2015), a late 18th-century census shows that, at the time, only 37% of Hungary's population identified as ethnically Hungarian. However, following World War I, as a punitive measure, the Treaty of Trianon detached two-thirds of Hungary's territory, with new borders drawn largely according to ethnicity: on the detached territories, only 30.2% of the population was ethnically Hungarian. The subsequent association between ethnic diversity and the country's disintegration may help explain Hungary's restrictive immigration policies over the past century. Reflecting this, in 2014, the National Statistical Office only reported 140,536 foreigners residing in Hungary with long-term purposes.

While many of my Hungarian informants struggled to remember the presence of migrants in their childhood, Ilona was an exception. Since her father owned a construction company, she was surrounded by immigrants from a young age. She recalled the pity she felt towards them:

> *They arrived from Vajdaság* [pre-Trianon territory], *they did physical work, like construction, but could speak Hungarian. Still, I always felt that they felt like outsiders a bit and unfortunately, the prejudices in the country just strengthened this. I personally experienced that Hungarian society was quite non-inclusive towards them and that there were a lot of labels on them. Despite speaking Hungarian and many of them having Hungarian citizenship, they were always perceived as different, and I think this created a lot of distress in them.*

Beyond immigration being subject to tight control due to fear of espionage and ideological contamination during socialism in Europe, Martin Lange (2021) showed that individuals who lived under state socialism in Eastern Germany were more likely to be in favour of anti-immigration policies, which he traces to the erosion of trust. I argue that distrust is key in the case of Hungary too, which, coupled with the fact that Hungarian socialism always maintained a nationalist character, helps explain the difference in attitude towards foreigners during Hungary's and Venezuela's socialisms.

Although the discursive framing of transborder Hungarians – but not migrants – has become significantly more favourable since Ilona's childhood, her early experience considerably shaped her attitudes to her own migration project. Living in Budapest, she recognised the importance of English to advance her career, which sparked her move to the UK. However, Ilona had many fears regarding migration. She claimed that since the migrants she knew were lonely and socially isolated, she thought her chances of fitting into British society were slim: "*I definitely did not have a 'pink dream' regarding migration. [...] It was a big fear of mine that I would not be able to fit in. That an*

English person will never treat me as an equal. […] That I will never be able to be an equal member of society because I will always be a 'migrant Hungarian'." She even confessed that initially, she only applied for cleaning jobs, believing that an Eastern European with intermediate English would not be considered for any other role.

Coming from a country of minimal immigration, most of my Hungarian informants had little previous experience with ethnic diversity, making their time in London particularly unique. According to Lőrinc, "*It's exciting, it's exotic! I grew up on a housing estate in Hungary. For me, the yellow, black skin colour, different ethnicities, and cultures are all exotic. [...] There was none of this in my childhood."* Hence, race soon became a major point of contention in homewards interactions. This was illustrated when, at a business forum, a long-time UK resident gave a speech about cultural differences in advertising, comparing McDonald's ads across cultures. During the break, she told me that she had more slides on the company's use of Black people to promote diversity but added, "*These guys are Hungarians from Hungary, so I thought it's better to not go into this.*" Conversely, at the show of a stand-up comedian invited from Hungary, the audience responded to a racist joke with awkward silence, to which, annoyed, she exclaimed, *"Oh, you're not allowed to laugh at this, or the ethics police will take you away!"*, angering many.

The Hungarian film 'Az Állampolgár' [The Citizen] tells the story of an African immigrant who, despite working hard to learn the language and meet the requirements of naturalization, is repeatedly rejected. His experience unfolds in sharp contrast to the Hungarian state's efforts to grant fast-tracked citizenship to people of Hungarian descent – a selective engagement reflecting Didier Fassin's (2005) notion of the 'moral

economy of migration', whereby states decide not just who belongs legally, but who belongs morally, aesthetically, and politically. These parallel systems backfired during a 2018 campaign to repatriate Venezuelans of Hungarian ancestry. In the mid-1950s, around 1,500 Hungarians fled to Venezuela following the revolution against Soviet occupation, joining the roughly 2,500 Hungarians already in the country (Anderle, 2010). These immigrants formed vibrant cultural communities, like the Casa Húngara in Caracas (Soltész, 2020), which won the Deputy Prime Minister's Prize for Hungarians Abroad in 2017 (Horváth, 2017). Signalling the state's responsibility towards the community growingly impacted by crisis, a clandestine operation was organised to repatriate 350 Venezuelans of Hungarian descent to the Hungarian countryside. However, due to their darker skin, local residents mistook them for illegal migrants and repeatedly reported them to the police. Migrants were seen as morally suspect for being racially marked, even when ethnically Hungarian, which eventually prompted many of them to leverage their newly granted EU citizenship to move on to Spain and other countries.

The image of the 'undesired migrant' in Hungary often influenced how Hungarians related to their own identity as migrants. During an interview with Lőrinc, after discussing his reasons for leaving Hungary and his current life in London, I asked him, *"What does being a migrant mean to you?"*. After a long pause, he responded: *"I don't know, this is a hard question. Do you mean how I feel when I read about migrants in the Hungarian press?"*. Ferenc Kőszeg (2019) reflected on the changing connotations of the word upon being sued for defamation after calling two visitors of Orbán 'migrants' when, according to the statement, they "arrived in Hungary not as migrants, but through legal channels". Kőszeg explains that the pejorative use of the word results from the

government's political propaganda. The efforts to associate migration with criminality were evident in the National Consultation campaign launched in 2015 following Orbán's promise of a "rock-hard official and domestic policy not supporting immigration at all". The survey sent to Hungarian households intentionally blurred the line between refugees and migrants, stating: "subsistence migrants cross the border illegally and while they pretend to be refugees, in fact, they come for work and social services". This politicised framing shaped public attitudes by infusing the term with moral tension and connotations of discomfort, ambiguity, and even shame, complicating Hungarian migrants' ability to attach pertinent vocabulary to their experience.

Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller (1998) argue that migration is not just a simple cost-benefit analysis, but is influenced by historical, cultural, and social factors. Similarly, Min Zhou and Hasan Mahmud (2023) contend that migration is "shaped by the intersection of a range of noneconomic factors, including migration histories, cultures, networks, and state policies in both sending and receiving countries" (p. 3). In this section, I demonstrated how experiences with the home country's past and contemporary immigration regimes framed the meanings and expectations attached to the migration project. Viewing migration as constructed through the lens of national frameworks that categorise migrants as assets or threats, I highlighted that collective memory and emotion work together to create a repertoire of moral templates, which determine whether migration becomes normalised or stigmatised.

Emigration regimes

During her lifetime, my Hungarian participant Aranka had two migration experiences: one to Poland in the 1970s and another to London in 2010, which corresponded to two radically different regimes governing emigration. "*The socialist camp is the best place in the world so one could only travel there."* – she started in an ironic tone – *"We had a red passport, which was only valid for socialist countries, so we could go to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, but not to 'the West'*." However, one day an opportunity emerged to visit Austria:

> *My husband's family friends invited us for a visit. They lived in Vienna and had a hotel there. They didn't have children, so they wanted us to inherit the hotel on Stephansplatz. But it was simply impossible for me to go with my husband as 'we would escape'. So, we were only allowed to go one by one. He went for a month and returned and then I went and returned. And that was when I was confronted with the fact that oh wow, this is not really the kind of 'rotting West' they kept talking about*.

Still, she decided to stay put. As she explained: "*My original upbringing and views were so strong that I decided it was out of the question to leave Hungary as it was the best place in the world."* It was not until years later that she left on a prestigious grant for space researchers to Poland, where she stayed for the next three decades. Nonetheless, looking back, she confessed being disappointed: despite opportunities at top institutions worldwide, she blamed her socialist conditioning for choosing Torun, the location of a previous socialist exchange. While emigration was easy, her years of motherhood were characterised by scarcity, and her husband was incarcerated for a while on political grounds.

Aranka's testimony highlights the interplay between external constraints and internalised ideologies. To explore the dynamic, I deploy Isaiah Berlin's (1969) concept of negative and positive freedoms, which Hein de Haas (2021) highlights as useful for understanding how

"individual migration capabilities and aspirations are shaped by, and interact with, macro-structural processes" (p. 23). In Berlin's theory, negative freedom refers to the absence of barriers or constraints. As Haas explains, "this comes close to popular ways of conceiving freedom, which often focus on the role of governments in imposing constraints on people's freedom or even being an outright threat to people's lives, for instance through regulation, oppression" (p. 24).

In contrast, positive freedom results from the individual's ability to take control of their life, pursue goals, and pro-actively improve their circumstances. According to de Haas, "the absence of external constraint (negative liberty) is not a sufficient condition for people to exert migratory agency, because they need a certain degree of 'positive liberty' that will enable them to enjoy genuine mobility freedom" (p. 24). In conditions of a positive unfreedom, the legal right to migrate exists, but the subjective capacity to imagine and desire mobility is thwarted. In Aranka's case, despite the ability to take up her grant anywhere, internalised ideology contributed to what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) would call a 'habitus of constraint' (Ray, 2011) that limits one's imagination of possibility.

Historically, in Hungary, emigration was seen as a 'tragic act of self-dissention', encapsulated by the Hungarian poet Mihály Tompa's line "one who changes their homeland should also change heart"[3] (Nyíri, 2017). Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron (2001) argue that such views were rooted in 19th-century nationalist political perceptions, which regarded emigrants as national traitors. In the early 20th century, Hungary still encouraged engagement with emigrants, using consulates to promote political involvement abroad but with the Communist takeover of 1949, strict Soviet-style border controls were imposed. As Irén Gödri, Soltész Béla and Boróka Bodacz-

[3] In 'Levél egy kibujdosott barátom után' [A Letter after a Friend in Exile] (1851).

Nagy (2014) explain, “entering or leaving the country became subject to special permit and those who departed illegally or did not return home from abroad were sanctioned, for instance with deprivation of citizenship, confiscation of property or imprisonment for illegal border crossing” (p. 11). According to Szente-Varga and Bata-Balog (2021), emigrants were seen as a negative reflection of socialist Hungary. Therefore, the state labelled dissidents “fascist criminals, class enemies, and useless, workshy rabble” (Kunz, 1985, p. 102), rendering contact with them both undesirable and practically impossible. Consequently, many emigrants faced severe precarity at the time when the nation-state was the supreme form of polity, and belonging to the diaspora meant being second-class citizens (Herner-Kovács, 2014).

Migration is a fundamental personal freedom ensured by liberal states and upon Hungary’s democratic transition, a law was passed that allowed nationals to travel abroad, with the country’s EU membership guaranteeing the free movement of people since 2004. On a structural level, this made emigration remarkably easy as the story of a man I met at Pannónika reveals:

> *My mate came home to visit from London and on his last day, he came over to my place to celebrate. After a few beers he was like why don’t you come back with me? I had just sold my car, so I had the equivalent of 700 pounds, and I thought it was a good moment because of that, so we went online and booked my ticket. It was already past midnight when I told my mum to fetch my suitcase so I could pack to move to London. She was like you are going to bed not to London! But I really got on the plane the next day and started my life here with those 700 pounds.*

However, liberal laws and negative perceptions of emigration can co-exist and similarly to other Eastern European sending countries that reject emigration as an acceptable solution (Dzenovska, forthcoming; Genova, 2019), national narratives perpetuate stigmas by moralising migration. The idiom ‘külföldön kolbászból van a kerítés’

[abroad the fence is made of sausage] encapsulates a judgement of emigrants as morally misguided. Fears surrounding emigration present among the older generation often blend with patriotic discourses promoted by Orbán's regime to frame staying in Hungary as a national obligation. Adrienn recalled saying goodbye to her elderly neighbour, who exclaimed, *"My dear little Adrienn is becoming a dissident as well – how bad for the country!"*, a remark that exemplifies the politicization of departure rooted in a merge of socialist and nationalist discourse.

Aranka's second migration occurred in 2010, when she moved to the UK with two suitcases after her divorce – a step that required minimal effort. The experience made her increasingly frustrated with her compatriots' complaints about the difficulty of leaving. Responding to a Facebook enquiry by a woman of a similar age, she shared her story, only to be met with the comment *"Obviously, you joined relatives…"*, to which she replied, *"Obviously, not!"*. Having migrated made Hungarians proud – not of enjoying a better life standard but of having taken a leap of faith despite nay-sayers. Barbara confidently recalled that when people complimented her bravery for having migrated, she cynically responded that they were the brave for staying, choosing struggle despite the option of an easy way out. Lőrinc also felt irritated with his friends for similar reasons:

> *I cannot afford myself the luxury of living my life thinking what would have been if and I should have gone and everything. Many of my friends are in these shoes, […] still playing this instrument of 'I should have gone, and I will go', and they are playing the very same tune for the last 10 or 15 years. And it is very sad to hear. And I am like why did you not go darling? You pack your bag, buy a Ryanair flight and that's it.*

While the Hungarian Ambassador described resistance to return as a mental block that Hungarians needed to overcome, Hungarian migrants used similar language to talk

about migration itself: a mental block they had to defeat, like the elephant conditioned from a young age to believe it cannot break free from its chains.

At Pannónika, two migratory generations shared a space. Although ’56 migrants were aging and unable to continue in leadership roles, they were reluctant to cede them to newer arrivals, believing they did not truly understand migration as they had not suffered the same hardships. The different ontologies of migration, one shaped by finality and exile and the other by ease and reversibility, served as important intra-diasporic boundary-makers. At a lunch after a Sunday mass, a newly arrived au pair complained about the restrictive nature of Brexit, which required her to leave after six months or obtain an expensive visa. An elderly migrant replied that she was actually happy about Brexit, as it helped young people relate to the ’56 experience. According to this logic, hardship came to be equated with moral legitimacy and constituted a basis for enforcing a ‘migratory authenticity hierarchy’. Interestingly, the categorization of the post-transition outflow as a ‘non-migration category’ has gained traction in Hungarian academic literature as well, with Balázs Hargitai and István Hargitai (2023) arguing that “Another autocratic regime has developed since 2010 with one significant difference from the pre-1990 time: a departure today does not carry the weight of finality as it used to, due to open borders and membership in the European Union. Return is possible even if few exercise it. This is why we hesitate calling the post-1990 departures ‘emigration’.” (p. 8).

By contrast, while migration was widely regarded a viable life strategy amongst Venezuelans, most people had had no intention of leaving the country. A recurring narrative that few would deviate from regardless of heritage, social status, or political

stance was one that presented Venezuela as 'the best country', a statement often justified through its natural wealth and beauty: *"Venezuela as a country, in its geography is a country that has everything: it has gas, bauxite, also minerals, they have just discovered gold, so it has everything, with a gorgeous climate on the Equator. If you want to feel cold, you can go to the mountains. If you want to feel warm, you can go to the beach"* – explained Claudio. A lot of these testimonies were not rooted in lived experience, but national imaginaries, and reminded me of Aranka's account of not wanting to leave 'the best country'. My suspicions about the scripted nature of such discourses were confirmed by Leandro, who noted that much of it originated in Chavista rhetoric: at one point, Venezuela was awarded a Guinness-like title for being the happiest country, which Chávez masterfully exaggerated to reinforce the idea of a paradise-like country.

Outmigration from Venezuela was historically negligible, with net migration never falling below zero until the early 2000s (Soltész, 2017). Even if Oates-Indruchová and Mueller (2017) suggest that socialist regimes place severe restrictions on the possibility to migrate, according to my informants, the Chávez regime did not initially obstruct emigration, as it sought to eliminate those opposed to its ideologies, particularly the upper classes of European heritage. This approach mirrors those present in the Soviet Union. As Matthew A. Light (2012) explains, following the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks allowed many political opponents to leave, viewing their departure as a way to remove hostile elements rather than risking internal subversion. He explains this to be motivated by "'regime adherence': the full integration of the individual into the Soviet order" (p. 396).

Nonetheless, such tendencies quickly changed. With Chávez's reforms, globalising tendencies came to be rejected, and the country's self-sufficiency was emphasised. While official rhetorics state that "migrating is voluntary and is done in exercise of the right to mobility that every human being has" (website of Plan Vuelta a la Patria) and the state does not formally restrict exit, it often creates insurmountable procedural, financial, and psychological barriers to emigration. Similarly to Hungary, much of the pressure operates on the narrative level, as highlighted by Romina in our conversation:

> Me*: "You can't imagine a situation in which you could collaborate [with the current regime]?"*
>
> Romina: *"No, they don't care. The Venezuelan who left, supposedly, or in the eyes of the Venezuelan government, doesn't love Venezuela."*
>
> *[…]*
>
> Me: *"And how does that make you feel?"*
>
> Romina: *"Very angry, because it can't be that just because you're trying to make a life for yourself – a life as in, to live, to stay alive – they say you're betraying your country."*

This mirrors the Soviet system again, where, according to Light (2012), no law explicitly forbade leaving the country, as the government sought to keep its repressive policies invisible, but migration was curbed in other ways.

"*In Venezuela, there are many controls preventing people from going.*" – began Paola what she described as a 'horror story'. Her sons had emigrated first and, over several years, saved money to fund their parents' move. However, Venezuelan passports, costing $200 plus $120 in administrative fees, seemed like a luxury, especially considering that the minimum monthly wage was $2.4 at the time (OVF, 2021). Moreover, bureaucratic inefficiencies caused long delays in document issuance. To navigate these hurdles, their sons hired a professional to assist from London. The first

obstacle arose when he offered to book their visa appointment in Caracas. Paola explained that traveling from Maracaibo to Caracas would deplete their funds, as national guards were stationed on every corner, requesting bribes. They also recalled previous difficulties with having documents delivered from Caracas due to the country's gasoline shortage. Therefore, Paola decided to travel to Bogotá, despite expecting this option to be similarly complicated since the border was closed – according to her, to prevent mass outmigration.

Paola's solution was to hire a *guarajiro*, a member of the indigenous people of Zulia state who live along the border with Colombia. She explained the clandestine operation:

> *We got in the van and started driving with a national guard wearing civilian clothes as the driver. He was going to talk to other national guards to let us pass. It was 1.00 in the morning, and we are in this car to Colombia, with the man getting off periodically to give dollars to the guards. We see a car in front of us that won't pay that gets pulled to the side. We are almost at the border, when they say, quick get off, take your luggage, the gate is closed so we cannot pass. So we arrived in Colombia walking! And thinking that after this, we would still need to return the same way, smuggled! We spent 1500 dollars just to be able to go to this appointment!*

Yet, the ordeal was far from being over:

> *With much rage, we bought the return ticket as the Venezuelan airlines only let you buy a return ticket even if you will not return. And this money was lost. But when they call me for the boarding pass, the woman checks in the machine and she cannot see the return ticket, so before she says anything else, she asks me where are your return tickets. I am like: here, have it! […] And then they open your bag and I had all of my family albums inside and all the medals I have won in my life for my sports achievements, and you have to pretend that you are only going on a holiday. Since I believe in angels, I kept praying throughout the whole process and I think that's why they didn't revise our bags so much. And they talk to you in such a despising manner! I used my Spanish passport to leave, and they ask me 'I supposed you have a Venezuelan passport as well?' And I say yes. 'And I suppose it's valid as well?' And where is your national ID? Open your wallet, what is inside? And when are you returning again? And your heart goes tuk-tuk-tuk. And just before we get on the plane they announce that those that we name have to come here as we want to check their luggage again.*

Certain job categories, such as police, military, civil servants, also risk being penalised for attempting to leave, including with incarceration. Venezuelans with political connections to opposition groups or those involved in anti-government protests are subject to heightened scrutiny, with travel restrictions and passport denials functioning as a form of political repression. Building on Michel Foucault's (2008) theory of the panopticon, Didier Bigo (2002) proposes the concept of the 'ban-opticon' to describe the control of mobility through subtle, dispersed technologies rather than outright prohibition. Before Chávez came to power, my informant Miguel worked in the military but left shortly after Chávez's coup to express dissent. As the date of his departure approached, he grew increasingly concerned about the possibility of being detained at the border. Even despite asking a friend to check if he was on the government's blacklist, leaving the country remained a terrifying prospect. This illustrates that the often-torturous conditions under which migration unfolded added a sense of irreversibility to the decision, despite many not initially intending their move to be final.

Demonising discursive framings, moral surveillance, and the construction of restrictive structures does more than cause practical inconveniences: the ease or difficulty with which migration can be carried out exerts an influence on individuals' affective relations with their countries of origin. Emotions like fear, shame, and anger accompany migrants and affect the extent to which they stay invested and are willing to entertain the thought of return, even in the form of short visits. As such, emotion is integral to the governance of mobility, both out- and inwards, erecting internalised barriers that might inhibit movement even when formal restrictions are lifted.

The myth – and reality – of 'the West'

Historically, short-term migration to Europe for the purpose of education, or sometimes work, functioned as a rite of passage amongst Venezuela's upper class. Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune (2002) calls migrant students in Europe the 'new migratory elite', arguing that student migration builds mobility capital and aids socio-economic advancement, while David Cairns (2014) highlights the appeal amongst students from the Global South of gaining human capital through time spent in 'more developed' countries. In the case of Venezuela, Tomás Páez (2021) describes the process as 'brain circulation' – a temporary migration benefiting both individuals and their home country. Often directed at ancestral homelands, these moves also carried the deep-rooted colonial belief that Europe was inherently more civilised.

Born to Hungarian and Austrian parents, Beatriz described herself as a product of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From a young age, her mother instilled a European etiquette in her, training her to walk with books on her head and eat with books under her arms. Yet, upon her arrival to Austria in 1970s, Beatriz was disillusioned to find that locals were neither better educated nor globally aware, with her classmates asking how she could use cutlery as a South American. Raised with strict Catholic values, she was also shocked by what she perceived as the loose morals of locals, particularly of women staying overnight at their boyfriends' homes.

In the context of mass outmigration, around half of my Venezuelan participants did not migrate directly to the United Kingdom but moved to their countries of ancestry first, a pattern commonly referred to as 'counter-diasporic migration' (King and Christou, 2008; 2010; Pelliccia, 2017; White and Goodwin, 2021). Focusing on Venezuelan

migration to Spain, Italy, and Hungary, Szente-Varga and Bata-Balog (2021) describe it as root migration, anchored in historical flows, supported by networks, family ties, property, and emotional bonds formed within tight-knit European communities in Venezuela. I argue, furthermore, that practical factors, such as access to citizenship, shared language, and familiarity gained through previous temporary migration played an equally important role in opting for these destinations.

My Venezuelan participants tended to perceive Europe as the 'first world' in contrast to Venezuela's 'developing' status, creating a strong aspirational pull towards the perceived 'centre'. As Flavia explained, *"Being Venezuelan is also about growing up knowing that you are on the verge to the centre of the world."* However, these expectations were often disappointed. Several participants referred to Venezuela's past economic prosperity to explain their assumption of arriving in similarly affluent countries. In Spain, many faced discrimination and found Latin American migrants relegated to low-status jobs. They also complained of disparate attitudes toward the elderly, whom the system labelled 'ready to retire', contrasting Venezuelan norms of working as long as possible. Consequently, the idealised image of Europe became more nuanced, with the 'first world' label narrowed down to a few countries, including the UK.

While European passports and existing networks rendered Europe a practical solution for some Venezuelans, it was rarely their preferred destination. For many, the United States remained the aspirational goal, rooted in a longstanding belief in the American Dream, which predated the crisis. As Esperanza explained, despite studying English at the British Council, the UK *"never crossed my mind… it's not perceived as an easy*

option with a possibility". Echoing this view, Yessica argued that Venezuelans *"are crazy about the US"* and continue to idealise it despite sanctions and anti-American rhetoric. Informants recalled pre-crisis shopping trips to Miami, reinforcing the US's image as a land of plenty. American beauty standards were also deeply ingrained, prompting a Chavista informant to describe Chávez's campaign as 'the beast against the beauty'. Consequently, the UK was often seen as a temporary waypoint, with the US viewed as the ideal destination of migration and return to a reformed Venezuela as the ultimate end goal.

Conversely, for most Hungarians, the UK was the realisation of a long-standing aspiration shaped by the geopolitical and ideological divide between East and West. As Polina Manolova (2023) explains, the 'myth of the West' embodies "political and cultural values of freedom, human rights and self-determination that filled the ideological essence of the capitalist transformations in Eastern Europe and that many saw as realistically attainable only in the 'West'" (p. 100). In Hungary, this myth was sustained through glimpses into Western life via dissident relatives: nearly every family had a 'rich uncle' who fled westwards after 1956, sending back money and Western goods like jeans, magazines, and radios that allowed Hungarians to listen to broadcasts beyond the Iron Curtain.

The yearning for a 'good' or 'normal' life (e.g., Galasińska and Kozłowska, 2009; Rabikowska, 2010; McGhee, Heath, and Trevena, 2012) drew on a deeply ingrained dichotomy positioning 'the West' in terms of civilization, progress, and democracy, and the East as backward, totalitarian, and underdeveloped. This extended beyond politics to suggest fundamental cultural and cognitive differences (Bartha and Valuch, 2024): for

many, ‘the West’ came to symbolise not only material abundance but a civilizational ideal – an aspirational horizon against which personal and national worth were measured. It is for this reason that Manolova (2023) describes migration as an “activation mechanism driving imaginative capacity” (p. 100) and Daria Krivonos and Lena Näre (2019) argue that migrants from culturally marginalised regions often seek to reposition themselves by aspiring to an idealised ‘West’ – a desire that remains potent even among those born into a borderless Europe.

Although with EU membership, access to ‘the West’ shifted from privilege to right, no longer tied to socioeconomic status, its symbolic pull persists. András Bíró-Nagy and Andrea Szabó (2021) report that a quarter of the Hungarian youth strongly desire spending time abroad, while 45% feel moderate temptation. The UK’s former EU membership facilitated such mobility, allowing young Hungarians to work as au pairs, join exchange programs, or take on seasonal jobs. One participant noted how studying abroad, once almost unimaginable to her, became actively encouraged in her younger sister’s generation. First-hand experience enabled direct comparison, with the UK’s evaluation being largely positive. Many described perceiving Hungary as small, provincial, and backward upon their return, while the UK emerged as a symbol not only of economic opportunity but a space for intellectual, creative, and even sexual self-realisation. As two informants remarked independently of each other, *“You cannot be angry at Hungary for being a gagyi* [lowbrow] *country that lacks the structures to support big dreams.”*

As such, despite their geographies, migration to the UK from both Venezuela and Hungary can be understood as fundamentally westward in an ideological sense, driven

by ‘the West’s appeal as an aspirational escape from the perceived limitations at home. Intertwined with such values, economic imperatives remain central to its pull. Nearly all Venezuelans who arrived from another European country cited economic reasons, viewing the UK as a remittance-sending lifeline. Similarly, although EU membership allowed free labour movement since 2004, it was the economic desperation of the financial crisis that pushed the first post-accession waves to the country. Nonetheless, access to the imagined promises of ‘the West’ remains uneven due to deeply entrenched global inequalities.

Miguel picked up the newspaper, pointing to an article he wanted his step-daughter to translate. *“And this? What does it say? Ah, based on this photo, I thought the man was smiling, not crying!”* He awkwardly apologised to me: *“An easy mistake, isn’t it, when you don’t speak the language?”* Later, during our interview, Miguel opened up about the heavy toll migration had on him: *“Being a migrant is a very hard life. It’s a sacrifice. But I am lucky because I am here outside, helping my family. That makes it invaluable, no?”* Miguel arrived in the UK 4.5 years prior, accompanying his wife, whom he met when she temporarily relocated to Venezuela. Nonetheless, despite her prior experience and networks in the UK, Miguel struggled. He only found work as a pizza delivery driver and suffered an injury slipping on ice. As the sole man in the household, he felt a pressure to provide for his family. Yet, his lack of English skills barred him from better opportunities, and long working hours made attending language classes impossible.

When analysing immigrant labour outcomes, Ivan Light and Carolyn Rosenstein (1995) distinguish between two types of disadvantage: resource disadvantage, stemming from

limited human capital, and labour market disadvantage, arising from discrimination. Miguel's most immediate barrier to labour integration was language proficiency. The majority of my Venezuelan informants never anticipated migrating and therefore, had not invested in learning languages. When they eventually left, many chose countries where Spanish or related languages were spoken or believed they would 'pick up' English organically. These assumptions were shaped by the Venezuelan context, where immigrants – often from countries of Latin languages – thrived without mastering Spanish. As Esperanza recalled: *"I remember the Portuguese lady who swapped words between Spanish and Portuguese: she never learnt Spanish! She would speak a little bit of one Spanish word in the middle, and you needed to catch up, like mmmm-mmmm-mmmm, all the time. And she never, after 50 years, she never learnt Spanish!"* In contrast, Hungary's post-socialist transition made language a central concern. Before 1990, Russian was the dominant foreign language, but political changes sparked a rush to teach and learn Western languages. Former Russian teachers retrained overnight, and university degrees became contingent on passing language exams. Migration to the UK was often triggered by such ambitions: fluency in English promised higher salaries, career advancement, or university access.

In Miguel's case, gender also played a crucial role. While Hungarian families generally viewed men and women as equal breadwinners, many Venezuelan men insisted on traditional roles, leading to frustration when they could not maintain their status abroad. Venezuelan women tended to adapt more easily, feeling liberated by the UK's gender-equitable labour market, enjoying migration as a source of empowerment, similarly to other Latina migrants around the world (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Villalba *et al.*, 2018; Mejía and Vázquez Maggio, 2022). Several women also migrated through British

partners, a pattern I did not observe amongst men. In fact, some of my male participants in both groups moaned the difficulty of finding a partner of the same nationality. Although the marriage route offered security, it also carried stigma, as it cemented women's position within a migrant hierarchy due to the perceived necessity to access 'the West' through merit. Esperanza, a Venezuelan journalist, reflected on her marriage in these terms:

> Esperanza: *"It was quite another plan to chase a man to move abroad, but it turned out that way. So I came here, I'm not very proud to say, but I came here to marry a man."*
>
> *[…]*
>
> Me: *"So why are you saying that you're, like, not too proud of this story?"*
>
> Esperanza: *"No, because I always would like to be a more independent person […] it's nicer to say I came to do a post-graduate, it's nicer to say I came because someone offered me a nice job, it's not too much nice to say I came to marry a man and be a housewife, you know."*

Venezuelans also faced greater challenges achieving social integration, frequently being marked as the perpetual 'other'. Some reported being mistaken for Pakistanis – which they understood as one of the most looked-down-upon racial categories in Britain – with one woman barred from picking up her husband's package due to her visibly foreign appearance despite his British name. Racialization starkly contrasted with many Venezuelans' prior self-perception: one informant explained that in Venezuela, she was considered 'white', a status linked to privilege, but in the UK, she was labelled 'Latina', a degrading term.

Graciela's epiphany during our interview further complicated Venezuelans' romanticised view of migrants: *"We were quite humble thinking that the foreigner was better – those who came from Europe or the United States"*. She added that this attitude

did not extend to Latin Americans, towards whom Venezuelans felt a sense of superiority. Scholars (e.g. Koutonin, 2015; de Genova, 2017; Goodfellow, 2023) have long argued that race and class shape migration experiences in significant ways as wealthier, white migrants tend to be labelled 'expats', while 'the immigrant' is marginalised. This underscores Venezuelans' expectations about migration being misguided, with the colonial mindset revering Europeans, not migrants.

Conversely, as Ilona's above story illustrates, Hungarians often expected to face discrimination but did not encounter any. Enikő's arrival in 2007 coincided with the start of the global financial crisis: *"I was working as a payroll clerk, so I could see that less money was coming in compared to the previous year. There were layoffs, and when I sensed trouble ahead, I thought, I'm the only woman, I'm the only foreigner, so I was prepared with my cardboard box under my desk in case I needed to pack my things."* To make things worse, she soon needed to take an extended leave due to an emergency in Hungary. While at home, everyone warned her she might not have a job upon return – a narrative she herself believed. Yet, she managed to stay employed, an outcome she found unbelievable as a migrant. Furthermore, despite Brexit principally targeting Eastern Europeans, my Hungarian participants reported no direct experiences of discrimination in connection to it.

According to Michael Jackson (2012), "the migrant's struggle for ontological security is a struggle against stigma, against being diminished, degraded or unfairly treated in his everyday dealings with locals, and of having to constantly justify to himself and others the sacrifice he has made in leaving kith and kin for an ostensibly better life abroad" (p. 195). As Patria Román-Velázquez and Jessica Retis (2021) argue, Latin Americans

remain the ‘invisible’ community of London, with the dismantling of the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, a key Latin American hub, illustrating how gentrification uproots Latino livelihoods and community. Bureaucratic forms as well as the UK census still lack a ‘LatinX’ category, and campaigns for greater visibility – as illustrated by the short film ‘The Box’ – face institutional indifference. Meanwhile, the Venezuelan migrant profile has shifted from a small group of highly qualified, financially secure individuals to a growing population of less qualified newcomers with limited savings (Szente-Varga and Bata-Balogh, 2021; Eguren and Estrada, 2018), often confined to ethnic networks, which exacerbates challenges of integration.

Strikingly, however, both groups shared the view that, while they did not necessarily feel integrated into British society, they did feel integrated in London. This sentiment paradoxically often arose from a collective experience of non-pertinence to ‘British life’, as Ignacio’s testimony illustrates: *“We do not do anything now. Our age and language knowledge have prevented us from breaking this barrier. […] I have never been part of an English group because my English is really bad.”* – he confessed. Notwithstanding, once he memorised words like ‘cucumber’ and went shopping on his own, he realised that *“Those behind the counter are not actually English and also speak bad English!”*. Most notably, he concluded that the system can still work, as shared unfamiliarity aids the improvisation of alternative ways of coping.

Socialism as a coping mechanism

One day between Christmas and New Year, a post appeared in the largest UK-based Venezuelan Facebook group, complaining that hallacas sold for £7–10 a piece was daylight robbery. For Venezuelans, hallacas, a stuffed corn dough wrapped in banana

leaves, were an essential part of Christmas, rich in symbolism as they merged the indigenous corn diet, the African technique of cooking in banana leaves popularised by enslaved people, and the Spanish colonial meal. My participants emphasised that hallaca-making, often accompanied by festive singing, drinking, and dancing, was more important than Christmas itself. Families would gather over two days, working in a production line with one's age or rank in the family assigning them to particular tasks. The dozens of hallacas that resulted from the process would be exchanged with friends and neighbours throughout the season, marking them as vital tools for maintaining social bonds.



Pictures 2 and 3. Hallaca-making.

The post's author cherished the opportunity to buy hallacas in London, but felt prices had become inflated by greed and proposed a central committee to regulate prices. Since the state could not perform this role in the UK, he nominated the Facebook group's admins. His suggestion was to cap prices between £4 and £6, with producers submitting samples to be rated, giving customers a clear sense of what they were worth. It did not take long for the thread to explode, with the controversial proposal sparking fierce debate. Although the author

never explicitly linked the idea to socialism, many argued that it invoked the regime they had fled.

The debate over hallaca prices was about more than just economics: it touched deep sentimental and political nerves. Maurizio's annual mission to distribute hallacas to underprivileged Venezuelan families in London was the only locally directed Venezuelan diaspora initiative I documented, underscoring hallacas as an inalienable cultural right. Celebrating a proper Christmas was crucial, especially given that the festivity had often been politicised by the Maduro regime, most recently by moving it to the autumn to distract from allegations over a rigged election. In this context, profiteering on hallacas was seen as a betrayal of the cultural fabric of diasporic life.

I witnessed these tensions firsthand at Isabel's house, where I was invited to help prepare the dish. Without the traditional extended kin network, Isabel had hoped her two teenage daughters, raised mostly in the UK, would join our skeleton of a team, but they showed little interest. Occasionally coming downstairs, they questioned our efforts: *"You know you could just buy them?"* One of them even suggested selling what we made to become rich. Isabel quickly reprimanded, *"Hallacas for us are sacred. And what is sacred is not for sale!"*, with the couple later commenting how quickly their daughters were buying into capitalism in the UK.

The opening vignette reveals a striking irony of migrants fleeing a socialist state but recreating elements of the socialist system amidst a neoliberal context, often unconsciously. Are such practices forms of critique, habituated responses, or alternative visions of a more egalitarian collective life? Rafael A. Jimeno *et al.* (2023) describe political ideologies experienced in the home country as both 'political baggage' and an

immigrant's 'tool kit' (also in Wals, 2013). As Alejandro Portes, Cristina Escobar, and Renelinda Arana (2009) and Javier M. Rodriguez *et al.* (2020) also highlight, migrants carry with them not only material resources but also political perspectives and knowledge formed through lived experience that shape how they navigate life after migration.

Venezuelan and Hungarian migrants frequently arrived in the UK with expectations that liberal capitalism would provide what socialism or post-socialist conditions failed to deliver. Yet, the ideological promise of 'the West' frequently clashed with the lived reality of a UK plagued by Brexit, post-pandemic recovery, and the increasing impact of the war in Ukraine. As Nicholas de Genova (2017) highlights, what is often labelled a 'migration crisis' is, in fact, more accurately understood as a crisis of liberal democracy, which has given rise to an increasingly exclusionary migration regime. At the core of migrants' struggles lies a deeper tension: migrants are caught between the broken promises of their countries of origin and the unmet expectations of the host society, where hopes for financial stability and social mobility are increasingly deferred.

"I cannot believe you sold the display cola! Will you also sell the shoes off my feet? You are such a capitalist!" – Rafael may have uttered these words teasingly, but the subtle disapproval in his words was unmistakable. I was surprised. He had told me so many times that capitalism was the answer. Dreaming of opening his Italian restaurant, he loved the idea of the American self-made man. He said that capitalism was good because it is the only system that let people advance their lives, claiming that the biggest problem of Venezuela was that it had been colonised by Spain and not the UK,

otherwise it would be like the US. Yet, here he was, reproaching me for creatively responding to customer needs.

Meanwhile, I found myself unsettled by how effortlessly Rafael navigated shortage. One day, we were out of quinoa, pork, and yuca – a quarter of our menu – forcing me to warn customers and offer alternatives. I was also told of an evening shift when arepas were filled only with meat as nothing else was available. With constant pressure to meet weekly sales targets and negative reviews pouring in over missing items, I felt annoyed. It was not just Rafael: all my Venezuelan colleagues showed a similar approach. Our stall served as an informal hub for Venezuelan workers across the market, who routinely stopped by to ask for, or simply take, pots of fried plantains or yuca. When I expressed concern, the only explanation I was given was that they were Venezuelans and worked at the marketplace.



Picture 4. Arepas being prepared.
Picture 5. Different types of filled arepas.
Picture 6. A typical Venezuelan bowl with yuca and fried plantains.

It became clear that allowing them to extract our resources destined the very structures that sustained us to a short-lived existence. Yet building good relations with neighbouring vendors proved vital. These connections formed the safety net we relied on in emergencies. We were constantly short on basics: one day it was salt, and I was

told to borrow from the Venezuelan girls at Crimson Wok; another time it was receipt paper or oil from Fishfolk. I even saw a carton of Coke being gifted to us from next door. Unaccustomed to this culture of favours, I felt uneasy. My manager reassured me that such exchanges were rooted in the mutual trust and solidarity we had built, but to me, it resembled Chávez's strategy of gifting oil to neighbouring countries in exchange for political loyalty: an improvised economy of interdependence shaped by chronic scarcity.

Towards the end of my shift, my frustration burst, and I asked Rafael why our Venezuelan bosses could not restock properly to avoid such situations. He looked at me, puzzled, and shrugged his shoulders:

> Rafael: *"If you think we are understocked here, you should see the reality in Venezuela. There is nothing. But it doesn't feel like that because we improvise: if there is no rice, let's eat corn, if there is no corn, let's do something from flour, let's scrape all the leftovers together and there is a meal. The same here: if there is no Venezuelan white cheese, we just replace it with cheddar, no problem."*
>
> Me: *"Yeah, but what if somebody comes here specifically because they want to eat Venezuelan cheese and they don't want the cheddar cheese?"*
>
> Rafael: *"Come on, it's not possible to always have it all, when you go to any shop, you are already calculating with the fact that things you want will not be available. We are completely used to it in Venezuela; something is always missing. Have you ever lived in war conditions? It is like that. Now you don't have food, then you don't have electricity, it's always something missing. We just learn to improvise."*

As the shift wound to a close, Rafael and I were leaning against the counter, watching the last customers finish their meals. Suddenly, Rafael broke the silence inflicted on us by our earlier disagreement:

> *People here are so spoilt but they 'se ponen a morir'* [literally 'they put themselves to die', meaning it is the end of the world] *if conditions are not ideal. Their day is ruined if a bus is late. They don't have any problems or*

> *difficulties – if you ask them if they have enough money to buy food for the next 7 days, they will all say yes. In Venezuela, people might have money to buy food for the next day or two – if at all. It is ridiculous that people will call in that they cannot work because of depression. What depression? In Venezuela, nobody has anything, but they still manage to be happy!*

While Rafael dreamt of the fulfilment of the capitalist dream, he also believed that wealth could weaken people's problem-solving skills. For him, resourcefulness cultivated in response to scarcity was a virtue to hold onto. Conversely, adopting a capitalist mindset represented a value loss as capitalism was perceived to create unimaginative 'machines' who could never be satisfied.

"Do you want to see what being Venezuelan means to me?" – asked Rafael, shoving his phone under my nose without waiting for an answer. The video that played showed a motorbike gracefully gliding down the motorway. It was only when the camera zoomed out that the missing front wheel became visible, replaced by a stick balanced on a roller-skate. He must have seen the video dozens of times but still giggled away at its ingenuity with genuine pride. Socialism has often been criticised for stifling creativity, yet in my fieldwork, I witnessed a different impact. Venezuelans saw themselves as resourceful, constantly finding creative ways to survive. While socialism did not support emigration, the experience of having lived under socialism aided socialist subjects as migrants in two crucial ways: by prompting them to demand central welfare provisions and by improvising creative solutions when these were not available.

What used to be provided by the state was now accessed through the surplus of for-profit companies, with VeneHelp emerging out of such resourcefulness. Alejandra, the founder of the organisation, was undergoing chemotherapy and noticed some machines being decommissioned by the hospital. Even in her fragile state, she immediately connected this surplus to the needs of Venezuela, initiating efforts to repurpose the

equipment for her home country. My elderly Venezuelan informants often lamented being denied a pension from Venezuela and not finding work in the UK due to their age. Therefore, I was always surprised to see them show up to gatherings with hairstyles following the latest trends. It was only later that I understood that they volunteered for the trials of top haircare brands. I was amazed that these women, who, just months earlier, asked for help navigating the tube had managed to 'crack the system'.

Liliana also emphasised that when living standards dropped and British people panicked, Venezuelans simply relied on the survival skills they adopted in Venezuela: *"I think this is with most Venezuelans, they're extremely creative just because when things don't work, you have to make them work […] So you figure out something that, you know, works for you. So you always try and find your way around anything. And I do think that it's quite a good skill to have!"* This contrast became especially clear during Covid, a context that felt closer to 'normalcy' for Venezuelans due to the frequent 'lockdowns' caused by electricity shortages back home: *"At the beginning of Covid, I was extremely prepared. I was like, hmm, this feels kind of weird. And I bought like everything that I needed to buy in advance because we're used to crisis in Venezuela. So, you know, all the necessities you need, like canned foods, toilet paper, all that before there was a crisis. I was like fully packed!"* – she explained.

When migration fails to deliver the anticipated outcome and becomes a site of disillusionment, migrants often revert to familiar practices as pragmatic responses to material and emotional need. Central to this discussion is the legacy of lived socialism (e.g. Verdery, 1996; Morawska, 2001; Fürst and McLellan, 2017; Todorova, 2018), understood less as political allegiance and more as a repertoire of coping strategies that

endure in the face of unmet promises of economic mobility. Crucially, as Deema Kaneff (2022) argues, post-socialism is not just about what came after socialism, but equally about how societies navigate the transformation into capitalist systems grounded in the presumed economic and political superiority of the latter, grappling with its promises of development, modernity, and individual freedom, which often remain unfulfilled.

Hungarians who failed to reach financial advancement expressed similar ambivalence as Venezuelans, longing for the predictability and stability socialism once provided amidst economic hardship and shrinking welfare in the UK. Since her divorce, Tímea from Hungary had been living in council housing, enjoying various benefits. Yet, she resented the lack of free childcare and higher education that she saw her parents' generation take for granted during socialism. Determined to recreate these structures and insisting that due to their socialist past, Hungarians 'a jég hátán is megélnek' [can live on the back of ice], Tímea improvised her own welfare system. She spent hours on an app hunting for free books, sometimes driving long distances using her petrol allowance to collect a coveted find – she never read them, but having them made her feel comfortable. She also devised her own childcare by signing up for a yearly pass at the local swimming pool, which included use of a supervised playroom.

One might argue that 'resourcefulness' emerges from scarcity rather than socialism, and I do not dispute that precarity can prompt creative coping strategies. My argument, however, is that scarcity is so central to how resources are managed in socialist systems that it constitutes a collective horizon of experience. The connection was emphasised by my informants themselves, who explained resourcefulness as a byproduct of socialism that became revitalised inter-generationally when the new system brought new

challenges – invoking a transcendent resilience rooted in socialism that also extends beyond it. This was articulated by Réka in the following words: *"I came to the conclusion that Hungary gives you a very harsh, how shall I put it? It gives you a universality that you are resourceful and you are able to initiate anything. […] Those who were raised in Hungary were raised in a very tough land that gave you a very good tool kit."* She saw it as a kind of return: an inherited response that keeps being reactivated in light of the recurrent vulnerability of Hungarian life. Beyond resourcefulness constituting practices adopted during the socialist era by older Hungarians, amongst younger Hungarians, these were acts of resilience that pertained to a nation surviving across different regimes.

This explanation is also underscored by the fact that Hungarians explained resourcefulness as the ability to see value where British people were oblivious to them. When Ödön first considered higher education in the UK, the idea seemed out of reach due to the cost difference. However, he soon realised that by navigating capitalism strategically, he could achieve his goals. He started relying on his 'Eastern European wit' to always find the cheapest option, describing one of his breakthroughs in the following words: *"I started having a look on websites like Spare Room to see how low one could go and still find a liveable place […] I was paying £725 monthly at the time, would I get something for £500? OK, I would. For £400 monthly as well. And then I went lower and lower and when I set £300 for the search, that's when it showed me some guardianships."* Guardianships are arrangements whereby individuals live in vacant properties temporarily to secure them for the owners, paying reduced rent. While many locals struggled with high living costs and his peers took on student loans, Ödön

lived in the heart of Kensington, feeling a sense of triumph for having outwitted the capitalist system.

Manolova (2023) observes that Bulgarian migrants who failed to realise their capitalist dream often re-evaluated socialism in moral terms, with one participant describing capitalism as ‘one big lie’, likening it to a self-imposed prison driven by illusory ideals. Her interlocutors “countermap the trauma of the present to the stability and fullness of what was before” (p. 99) by invoking values of solidarity and justice. Amongst my participants, the reproduction of socialist practices signals not a political rebirth but acts of resilience amid marginalisation. Though stripped of their original political undertone, these habits nonetheless serve as implicit critiques of the present. By drawing on a residual architecture of feeling emerging from lived familiarity with former systems, migrants re-inhabit a past social logic to navigate a present that fails to meet expectations, inherently claiming more equitable futures in the new context.

Nonetheless, as migrants’ economic situation was fluid, so were such attitudes. My Hungarian informant Dénes described his studies in the UK as a collective financial effort by his family, alleviated by local support structures like subsidised student housing. As he recalled, *“As I lived in the cheap dorm, I was living with rather poor people, so there were poor English people, there were Romanians and there was me.”* However, after securing a banking job upon graduation, his view on housing shifted: *“It is impossible to find a really great place in London as the good and the slum are alternating everywhere since it is an obligation for each borough that for every newly built flat, they need to provide a certain number of council houses.”* – he complained. As Kaneff (2022) notes, council estates in the UK often resemble Eastern European

socialist-era housing in both structure and social landscape. For Dénes, their presence was a disturbing evocation of the economic dependence he was hoping to leave behind.

Those who achieved upward mobility often saw 'resourcefulness' as a stain on the national group's image and distanced themselves from practices considered incompatible with capitalist values. Upper-class Venezuelans feared being stigmatised as state-dependent 'beggars' due to their socialist past. In the 2000s, amid an oil boom, Venezuela's redistributive policies expanded access to housing, healthcare, and education. This reduced poverty but created dependency and enhanced political control, clashing with neoliberal ideals of self-reliance. Ignacio reflected on the mindset it produced: *"The disaster wasn't just economic, but it also affected people's mentality. People got used to begging, to asking. The government had to give them everything.* He argued that consequently, *"people don't think about moving forward. They think about seeing what they're given."* Enikő distanced herself from her Hungarian compatriots for similar reasons: *"I experience often that they have come to exploit the country. […] This is why the NHS is where it is and education where it is. But people don't like to talk about it. I am ashamed that there were Hungarian people who did this exploitation. If we would like to take from the pot of meat, we should also go hunting!"*

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that migration is not only a movement across geographies, but a journey through political legacies, ideological terrains, and moral economies of solidarity. Migration is often theorised as a break from one's home country, but I illustrated that migrants often reactivate and reproduce home-state political ideologies in

at least two crucial ways. Ideas about migration are embedded in immigration and emigration regimes pertinent to national histories and contemporary political ideologies and are often internalised as migrants imagine what it means to leave, and what success should look like. At the same time, the coping mechanisms mobilised when expectations fail to materialise are equally informed by lived experiences of political regimes.

Failure to avail of the perceived benefits of capitalism often led migrants to enact practices and social logics pertinent to socialism. A divide emerged between those who achieved the desired goals of upward mobility and those for whom the promise of 'the West' failed to materialise, with Venezuelans often experiencing greater obstacles due to their racial perception, language skills, and unfamiliarity with the local system. Yet, the reappearance of socialist practices is not a story of ideological return. Instead, it is shaped by material need, embodied habit, and frustration with capitalist integration. Attending to these contradictions has allowed me to trace the afterlife of socialism not as a static belief system, but as living structures embedded in memory, once the language of ideology has long been left behind.

Chapter 3 – Who is the diaspora?

Introduction

> *We decided that we wanted to enjoy the advantages of the diaspora schemes offered by the state, so our organisation asked for a diaspora facilitator from the state. However, they ended up sending us the son of one of the big Fidesz guys. For an entire year, we were in panic about what he would report back. (Hungarian participant)*

> *The Embassy is non-functional, so when it comes to organising events or keeping the community together, we have to do everything ourselves. I don't blame the employees as, in a way, they have fallen victim to the system as well. There was even a time when they were not getting paid by the Venezuelan state, but they still carried on with their duties. (Venezuelan participant)*

There is something remarkably different but at the same time remarkably similar about how the above informants experienced their home states from the United Kingdom: my Hungarian informant talked about its overwhelming presence in migrants' lives and my Venezuelan participant attested to its lack of engagement, while both described a deep distrust and disconnect. The sentiments shared are not isolated experiences, but characteristic of the relationship between the two states and their respective emigrant populations. In line with Hungary's and Venezuela's political ideologies, the two states' responses to the mass outmigration that ensued from their territories considerably differed. After a period of distrust, within the framework of a large-scale diaspora engagement implemented from 2010, Hungary has actively reached out to its citizens and offered them incentives to stay connected under the narrative that emigrants remain an intrinsic part of the home country. Conversely, Venezuela has upheld antagonistic relations with its West-bound emigrants, communicating to them in different ways that

they have lost their entitlement to Venezuela. Despite the differing contexts, in both cases, significant diaspora groups have emerged. However, not all emigrants have become diaspora members and not all members of diaspora groups oriented towards a particular country have been that country's emigrants.

This chapter is concerned with the state, the processes it sets into motion, and the frameworks it proposes amongst which migrant's homewards activity unfolds. Given the intensification of the transnational existence of both states and migrants, with not only migrants living their lives transnationally but also states governing across borders, diaspora-home state relations have diversified and consequentially so. Thus, understanding their specificities is an important step towards building theories about the transnational life of states and not only of people. As Alexandra Délano and Alan Gamlen (2015) suggest,

> Previous research on state–diaspora relations has successfully 'brought the state back in' [...] But key questions remain where comparative research can make important contributions: How and why does the state matter in shaping these relations and what motivates the states, institutions and elites carrying out the policies? Does the momentum come from states themselves, from diasporas, or from other actors such as international organisations? How do diasporas react to state influence? What variables explain similarities and differences across cases? (p. 177)

It is along these questions that this chapter unfolds.

I have three principal aims for what follows: firstly, to provide an in-depth description of the two states' approaches to state-emigrant relations in order to lay the foundations for the rest of my dissertation. Secondly, to show the internal stratification of emigrant communities that emerge in response to state involvement. Thirdly, to introduce my theoretical contributions around two concepts, namely 'diaspora disengagement' and 'ideological citizenship'. Diaspora disengagement challenges previous assumptions that

different states' diaspora policies can be described on a scale between zero and the positive realms. Through my Venezuelan case study, I highlight a statal approach rooted in the active discouragement or hindrance of the emigrated population – or certain subsections of it – from staying involved in home country affairs post-migration. I use my concept of 'ideological citizenship' to shed light on a commitment at the heart of diaspora politics of both Hungary and Venezuela to use people transnationally to uphold ideologically driven regimes, the main tool of which is selective engagement.

I start my chapter by introducing the specificities of the Hungarian case, based on which I define a matrix that distinguishes between cultural communities and diasporas. I subdivide these into state-affiliated or non-state-affiliated categories to explain the processes of transformation brought about by the state's involvement. Relying on this matrix as well as on the concept of 'diaspora disengagement', in the following section, I describe the contrasting case of the Venezuela state's approach. In the third section, I highlight the ways in which ethnicity forms a basis for both states' selective engagement of emigrated citizens – and illustrate that inclusion along ethnic lines often transcends legal citizenship. Relying on inclusion and exclusion patterns, I tackle the role of non-citizens in the diaspora project and present an explanation through my theory of 'ideological citizenship' in the final section. The chapter relies on core concepts like state and citizenship, which I discussed in the Introduction and therefore, will not be providing a definition for in this chapter.

The omnipresent state and the Hungarian diaspora

"It is impossible to operate outside the state's involvement." – started Ferenc, a self-employed taxi-driver who has been living in the UK for over a decade – *"I tell you this because I tried."* In December 2020, due to a new pandemic wave and the approaching Brexit, around 200 Hungarian truck drivers became stranded in a 60-kilometre queue on the way to Dover shortly before Christmas. Ferenc watched in disbelief as the Ambassador *"turned up with a basket of pogácsa* [Hungarian savoury snack] *and a gallon of water to have his photo taken for the newspapers and hurried off on his Christmas holidays"*. Ferenc and some others kept trying to call the Embassy but to no avail. That was when, relying on the rudimentary networks Hungarians established for Covid assistance, he decided to organise a large-scale action of buying and delivering food to the truck drivers at his own expense. However, once newspapers started covering the heart-warming Christmas story, the state finally emerged: the Embassy approached Ferenc with an offer to support his future activities if he continued his operation under the aegis of the Hungarian state.

Ferenc's story is illustrative of the state's role in the evolution of the Hungarian emigrant community in London. Historically, Hungarians' presence in the UK was characterised by self-efficient groups that were created and operated out of the efforts of migrants around the practice of a shared culture. However, 2010 set a transformation into motion. It was the year Viktor Orbán came into power, who implemented a large-scale diaspora outreach programme with the goal of convincing people to think of themselves as part of the nation. The project has unfolded in various stages. As Fiona B. Adamson (2012) suggests, "the first step in the creation of a diasporic community is the activation of a transnational constituency from the mass of entangled and messy social networks that characterise the transnational social dimension of the international

system" (p. 33). Accordingly, the Hungarian state first mapped out initiatives that aligned with their ideology to offer collaborative opportunities to the scattered projects, thereby weaving migrant organisations into a web of state-affiliated diaspora groups.

Ferenc explained that initially, he was reluctant to take up the proposed pact since his campaign was inspired by criticism of the Hungarian state for failing to fulfil its duty to its citizens. Nonetheless, he was inspired by the resources, networks, and organisational structure that affiliation with the Embassy could provide. To incentivise participation, leaders in affiliated organisations are offered capacity building activities and networking trips to Hungary while active members can benefit from scholarships and educational visits as well as business opportunities through schemes like the Balassi and Rákóczi Programmes, the Diaspora Scholarship, or the Diaspora Project Network. Constituent organisations can avail of generous grants through the Bethlen Programme to help with relevant operational costs that range from the renovation of buildings to the invitation of folklore ensembles. Membership also provides organisations access to the Kőrösi Programme, the flagship scheme of Hungarian diaspora engagement, through which facilitators are dispatched worldwide to help organise the emigrant community, disseminate knowledge, and conduct educational activities. Beyond resources, membership is often perceived to raise participating migrants' status. According to Alan Gamlen (2008), diaspora narratives empower migrants through the construction of transnational collective identities: people previously perceiving themselves as members of a minority are elevated to form part of a global network.

Martin Sökefeld (2006) asks how it is possible that diasporas can be born well after the arrival of a group and can dissolve or expand and intensify if diaspora formation is

an inherent product of people crossing borders. To answer this question, it is essential to distinguish diasporas from cultural communities. In the framework I propose, cultural communities are understood as emigrant groups that evolve around cultural belonging and operate without a homewards orientation. The importance of such an analytical category is highlighted by Dibyesh Anand (2009), who states that without a homewards orientation, a community cannot be considered diasporic and migrants who have lost their sense of belonging and connectedness to the homeland tend to form dispersed communities instead. Khachig Tölölyan (1996) proposes the term 'ethnic community' as a separate concept from 'diaspora' and explains the difference in the following words:

> Both may mark and patrol symbolic and behavioural boundaries that preserve a collective identity other than the hegemonic one that dominates the hostland. Yet an ethnic community differs from a diaspora by the extent to which the latter's commitment to maintain connections with its homeland and its kin communities in other states is absent, weak, at best intermittent, and manifested by individuals rather than the community as a whole. (p. 16)

While the concept is useful, Tölölyan's exact phrasing of the term is unsuitable as a basis for my comparison as, given the racial diversity of Venezuela, 'Venezuelanness' is often articulated more as a cultural rather than an ethnic unity. Thus, I will use 'cultural communities' instead.

Tölölyan (1996) emphasises that these communities have the potential to turn into diasporas. Claiming that in their dispersed state, they often "lack either the material resources, the sociopolitical infrastructure, or the discursive incentives to represent themselves as diasporas" (p. 3), he pinpoints that diasporas are as much about power, capital, and (self)representation as about feelings of belonging. In his interpretation, thus, they can serve as excellent source material for diaspora creation if the connection to the homeland is reinforced through the allocation of resources and an official narrative

promoting national unity. Pannónika, one of the most prominent Hungarian diaspora organisations of London, has undergone such processes. Founded by refugees of World War II as a politically independent cultural centre in 1954, it became a flourishing space of Hungarian cultural life after it was taken up by refugees of the 1956 revolution. However, in the process of the Hungarian state's diaspora engagement, it became a state-affiliated member organisation and host of Kőrösi facilitators in 2017. While Pannónika embraced the generous help offered by the state, as highlighted by the chapter-opening vignette, they were oblivious to the fact that through doing this, they entered a complex web of obligations.

In order to make sense of processes pertinent to Hungarian diaspora formation and lay the foundations for comparison with its Venezuelan counterpart, I adopt a constructionist approach. The essentialist vs constructivist debate has generated conflicting views on whether diasporas are pre-political, historically rooted, natural entities or the results of social constructions (e.g. Conner, 1972 vs. Anderson, 1983). While essentialists view diasporas as organic results of border-crossing – an approach that places the emphasis on fixed identities –, constructivists understand the phenomenon to derive from political discourse that perpetuates collective identity. Élise Féron and Sofiya Voytiv (2021) suggest that diasporas are situational, relational, and contextual processes that come into being through mobilisations; they are 'projects', stances, and practices rather than groups with a pre-defined destiny. Adamson (2012) contends that as such, the term diaspora takes on more of a prescriptive than a descriptive role, offering a useful lens for understanding the engineered construction of a de-territorialised community.

I argue that diaspora formation as an instant result of border-crossing does not exist, and that diasporas are always the result of mobilisation. I further contend that diaspora mobilisation requires power and resources and thus, it is a process predominantly spearheaded by the state or the elites. As Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) underlines, transnational practices can originate in both the emigrant community and the home country. Michael Peter Smith and Luis E. Guarnizo (1998) differentiate between 'transnationalism from above', initiated by states and corporations, and 'transnationalism from below', driven by the decisive actions of international migrants. Modern diasporas emerge out of transnationalist tendencies: most often, they exist in communication with their states of origin. As such, the homeland does not exist solely as an abstract and unattainable ideal, but the diaspora retains the potential capacity to exert meaningful influence on it. However, this also means that the host country ceases to be a haven of disconnect from the control of the home state. Robin Cohen (1996) notes that a major shift had occurred by the 1990s, with diasporas evolving from victims of the nation-state to its challengers. Nonetheless, he contends that more recently, states have efficiently reversed this dynamic, redefining the concept of 'diaspora' as a dispersed form of belonging shaped by nation-states (Ragazzi, 2006). It is for this reason that Gamlen (2014) highlights diasporas as constituency-building projects.

To illustrate the parallel processes at play, I distinguish between state-affiliated and non-state-affiliated cultural as well as diaspora communities. Non-state-affiliated cultural communities are emigrant communities without a homewards orientation that operate independently from the home state whereas non-state-affiliated diasporas are emigrant communities that revolve around homewards orientation but have no relations to the state. Conversely, state-led cultural communities are emigrant communities that are at least

partially sustained and ideologically aligned with the home state, but do not have a homewards orientation, while a state-led diaspora operates with the state's help and is aligned with it through a homewards orientation. In coining the latter two terms, I draw on the concept of state-led transnationalism. State-led transnationalism is defined by Luin Goldring (2002) as the "institutionalized national policies and programs that attempt to expand the scope of a national state's political, economic, social, and moral regulation to include emigrants and their descendants outside the national territory" (p. 64). However, I refrain from adopting the term as it does not accommodate the cultural community vs diaspora distinction and it takes attention away from the agency of migrants within the structures created.

In Table 1, I provide a visual representation of the mechanisms at play within the Hungarian emigrant community in London. Historically, it was predominantly characterised by the presence of non-state-affiliated cultural communities, which mostly did not extend beyond their immediate function of bringing Hungarians together through cultural events. When the state extended membership to them, what the state proposed was widely interpreted by emigrants as their respective organisations' transformation into state-affiliated cultural communities whereby the state would boost their activities by attaching resources. However, the strong emphasis on shared culture – which migrants often perceived as the least threatening aspect of the existent link between state and citizen –, has been rooted in a moral imperative: that it is the obligation of every Hungarian to upkeep ethnic homogeneity and contribute to the construction of a Hungarian nation that transcends borders. In the context of Hungary's far-right nationalism, practicing the kind of culture that the state proposes signifies alignment with a political agenda, which the state then builds on – exploiting the moral

obligation of reciprocity created through the provision of resources – to promote expectations of physical and symbolic return. Thus, in the Hungarian case, the state is the primary force behind diaspora creation.

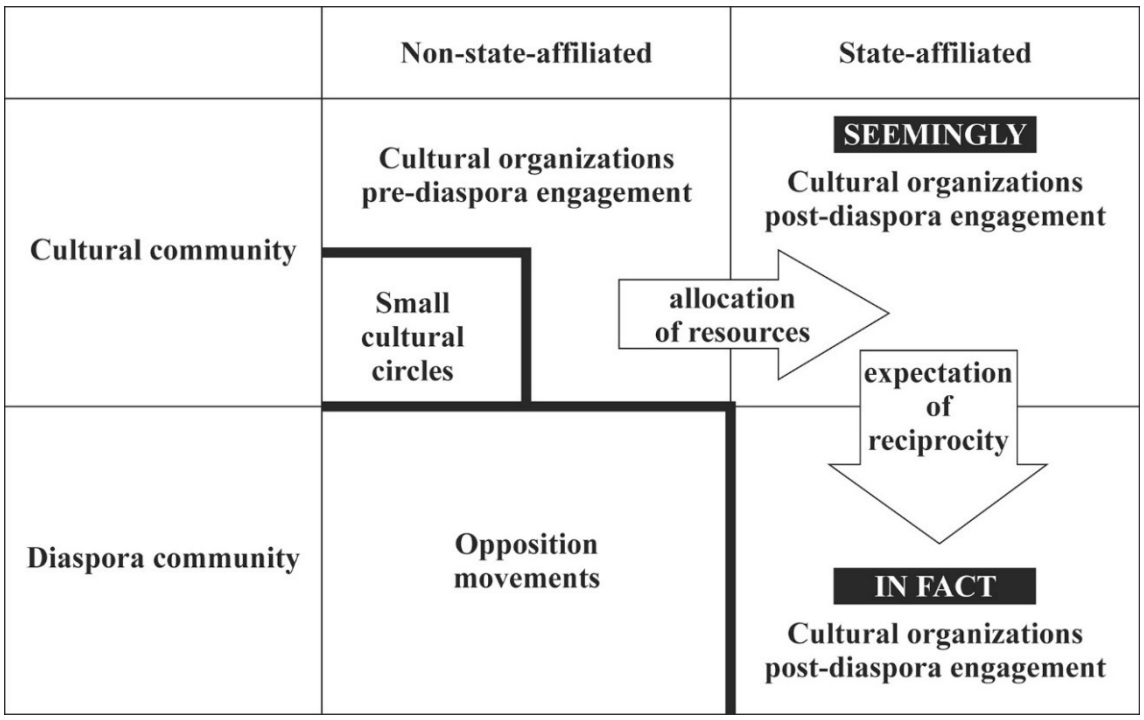


Table 1. The internal stratification and evolution
of the Hungarian migrant community in London

When Ferenc agreed to turn his initiative into a state-affiliated charity, he received a lot of criticism from fellow Hungarian migrants, who argued that he had sold his soul to Fidesz. One lady who was working at a Hungarian weekend school was particularly outraged at his decision and told Ferenc that she would discourage anybody from availing of his services since those were no longer politically neutral. In response, Ferenc enlightened her about her school also being the beneficiary of the Hungarian state's support. Upon the realisation that he was right, the lady never mentioned the topic again and silently succumbed to the status quo. Ferenc concluded that the home state's impact is so far-reaching that it is impossible to operate outside its realm.

Therefore, according to him, the wisest option open to Hungarians was to benefit from the advantages it offered without becoming too engaged with the political side of things.

As Ferenc's account illustrates, once the state embarked on its mission to engage migrants, it was hard to stay detached from it. However, as highlighted by Table 1., there are two types of groups left out of this equation. Pertaining to the non-state-affiliated diaspora category are a few groups mostly formed around opposition movements, like InMpulse, which uphold transnational ties with Hungary in order to promote democratic processes and campaign for a change of government. Such groups are volatile and characterised by isolation: although they are aware of the existence of state-affiliated organisations, they do not collaborate, do not use each other's spaces, and mostly do not share members. The other outlying category consists of those non-state-affiliated cultural communities who refuse to avail of the state's offers or are simply not considered worthy of being turned into state-affiliated diaspora members by the state.

One such group I engaged with was the Hungarian Book Club, predominantly made up of young intellectuals who met monthly to present and discuss books, with progressive conversations unfolding within its circles. An attendee recalled her struggle to find a venue for her events in the context of the rise of state-affiliated diaspora organisations: *"They are not looking for events that serve the community but for events that serve their agendas. With Hungarian Horizons, it is not worth trying as they are Orbán's creation. I once reached out to them with an idea of mine, but they got rid of me and when I went ahead with it in a café, a representative of theirs turned up to spy on us!"* She had no evidence to suggest that it was a state representative but backed her claim arguing that

one could recognise them by their demeanour. Her fear points to what Lisa Marie Borrelli, Annika Lindberg, and Anna Wyss (2021) call 'states of suspicion', capturing how suspicion contributes to the state's control over migrants both on the individual as well as structural levels, especially when it is imagined as omnipresent.

Eventually, the Book Club found a home at Pannónika, described by the group as a place that has retained its original function as a refuge for Hungarians. Nonetheless, whenever during the sessions, discussions were getting politically sensitive, members would warn each other: *"Pssst, you need to say it more quietly, remember, we are hosted by Pannónika after all!"*, suggesting that the space had become perceived as irrevocably aligned with the home state's ideologies. Although non-state-affiliated cultural communities are fuelled by their members' passion, they often struggle to sustain themselves and attract new members due to their limited resources compared to state-affiliated organisations. Consequently, many of these groups are gradually disappearing, with the Hungarian Book Club ceasing operations during my last month in the field, just after celebrating its 10th anniversary.

Turning non-state-affiliated cultural communities into state-affiliated diasporas through the allocation of resources fundamentally reorganised the dynamics in such groups as well because the state's support was perceived to have alleviated the need for people's time, effort, and financial investment to ensure their functioning. Pannónika's paid employee Levente described the ensuing changes in the following words:

> *There is a new phenomenon that when somebody comes, they are like wow, it is so beautiful, wonderful, here everything is functional. They think of it as an organisation with a full background that guarantees its functioning: everybody serves a role in the system, and they organise everything for us. So, I just come in, lean back, watch the event and then I nicely go back home. But ours has been a volunteer-run organisation all along since its*

> *foundations and the volunteers are responsible for all this, so everybody has been involved in the organisation, everybody contributed with whatever they could. It is not like this anymore.*

As Levente demonstrates, migrants' personal investment diminished as they gradually became consumers of ready-made cultural products provided by the state rather than active agents in upholding what they considered to be core to their Hungarian identity – a process I elaborate more on in Chapter 5. Such processes either triggered support amongst migrants for what the state prescribed under the ideology of nationalism or aversion due to its political undertones.

As such, the introduction of the Hungarian state's diaspora engagement was a major turning point in the life of Hungarian emigrants. Offering to invest in cultural activities, the state centralised initiatives and attached a strong political message to them, calling for transnational investedness. Although on the surface, this has guaranteed the rapid growth of communities, it fostered a utilitarian approach and emotional detachment amongst emigrants. This, in turn, significantly impacts how and to what extent members cultivate their new-found diaspora subjectivity. In the section that follows, I compare these processes to those taking place in the Venezuelan community to show how the contrasting case of the state's disinvolvement can fuel feelings and acts of connectedness, in both cases highlighting an implicit disregard of what the state proposes.

Diaspora 'disengagement' and the self-organised Venezuelan diaspora

"During the first years, we would go to work during the week and come together to demonstrate in the weekends. Nothing aggressive, just trying to raise awareness about

the crisis in Venezuela. Looking back, deep down, we all knew it would not make any difference, but we needed it as a community – some kind of outlet for the anger we all built up in Venezuela." – starts Isabel while preparing the 'guiso' [stew], the first step in the traditional Christmas hallaca-making process. Since she first met Carmen at the demonstrations, it has become their tradition to come together during the advent period to share the tradition that is at the heart of every Venezuelan's Christmas. For many Venezuelan migrants like Isabel and Carmen, who were both members of the white middle-class and left Venezuela for further education in their twenties more than a decade ago, along with being at the centre of their social lives, the demonstrations came to constitute an expression of their feelings towards their home country. *"However, one day, they came to a halt."* – explained Isabel.

> *That particular weekend, we spent a few hours demonstrating and afterwards, some of us went to listen to a talk organised by one of the local Chavista organisations. After the presentation, we asked a few questions, but nothing provocative, we just wanted to understand their point of view. However, the next day, there was a post on a social media platform that the following people are making disorder with protests, listing all of our names. That was a really scary moment, which made us abandon the project. Until this day, we have no idea who wrote the article or how they knew our names.*

Gamlen (2006) interprets disinterest as the opposite of diaspora engagement when he discusses countries that have not targeted their emigrated population with outreach schemes. Similarly, Mark Boyle and Rob Kitchin (2008) propose five approaches that states can take towards their diasporas, with the first category describing the lack of engagement and the others representing a scale of the engagement's intensity. However, based on my Venezuelan case study, I argue that a so far largely ignored process must also be made part of the analysis, namely what I call 'diaspora disengagement'.

Diaspora disengagement is more than the lack of engagement by the home state: it is the active discouragement or hinderance of the emigrated population – or certain subsections of it – from staying involved in home country affairs post-migration. Although Venezuela has upheld antagonistic relations with its West-bound diaspora, Venezuelans are reluctant to accept the exile imposed on them and have formed communities to promote change in the country. The concept is therefore key to explaining the tension that exists between the Venezuelan state and its emigrants in London.

As explained in the Introduction, until this day, the only attempt at any form of diaspora outreach from the current Venezuelan government has been the 'Plan Vuelta a la Patria' [Return to the Homeland Plan] scheme, which the Maduro government established in 2018 to assist voluntary return from Latin America. According to the programme's website, by the end of 2022, it had successfully repatriated nearly 30,000 citizens from 19 countries around the region. The programme has operated inspired by socialist principles: it is described as fulfilling the country's duties towards its citizens by helping those whose migration project failed by placing them into the social protection system of the home country. Its beneficiaries have primarily been the poorest of the poor, often of ethnic minority origins that the socialist regime fights to empower. Nonetheless, no diaspora initiative has extended beyond the American continent.

Thus, much of the work aimed at public diplomacy – raising awareness about the country's crisis and building relationships with local, regional, and supranational parliaments – is undertaken by self-organised diaspora groups (Bravo, 2014; Bravo and De Moya, 2015). Some of these groups have been actively engaged in humanitarian

effort by sending medicine, food, and sanitary supplies to Venezuela (Orozco, 2020), even despite the Venezuelan state's active discouragement of such intervention. Beatriz Padilla and Magdalena López Maya (2021) argue that this self-organisation driven by a homewards orientation lends to the interpretation of such processes as the emergence of the 'Venezuelan diaspora', a term first introduced in scientific literature by Iván de la Vega in 2009 (in Cañizález, 2018).

> *We have had zero relationship with the Consulate and Embassy. Because of their denial of the crisis – so Maduro and his government denies that there is a crisis –, they are very diffident towards NGOs. Partly because I don't think they care too much towards Venezuelans any day, but some so-called humanitarian organisations really have a political agenda, so they are very-very distrustful of all of us. So basically, I have zero relationship with the Embassy or the Consulate, but that does not mean that I would not like to have a relationship. I would love to, actually. If I could work with state institutions on a humanitarian basis, I would be delighted. I tried, but it didn't work. […] I was actually very badly treated by some of the officials there. I was surprised because it was so unnecessarily rude. And what's the point? I am just helping there; I never criticised anything. So, there is no point.*

This is how Alejandra, the founder of VeneHelp, one of the most significant Venezuelan diaspora organisations in London, described relations with the Venezuelan state. Unlike the Hungarian processes of state-affiliated diaspora formation, which unfold with the active involvement of the home state, the case of the Venezuelan diaspora can be analysed to show more parallels with 'victim diasporas' (e.g. Cohen, 1996), which are characterised by exile.

In diaspora literature, diaspora formation initiated by migrants 'from below' is often called 'long-distance nationalism,' a term coined by Benedict Anderson (1993; 1998) to describe emigrants' role in nationalism. He understood it as a form of mobilisation made possible by migrants' political unaccountability in liberal states, which facilitated their radicalisation and fostered a sense of belonging through the revitalisation of ethnic

identity. Subsequent scholarship, however, shifted the focus from nationalism to patriotism. Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron (2001) assert that long-distance nationalists believe in the unity of a nation, anchored by a common past, a shared identity, and a commitment to an ancestral home. Amongst long-distance nationalists, borders are not perceived as barriers to participation as they "may vote, demonstrate, contribute money, create works of art, give birth, and fight, kill, and die all for a 'homeland'" (p. 173). The actions of long-distance nationalists may centre around reconstructing the homeland, frequently by challenging the political system to create the necessary pre-conditions for return. This is why Zlatko Skrbiš (1999) suggests that long-distance nationalism is most characteristic of emigrant populations with a significant number of political exiles – or, I would add, individuals who left out of political considerations. Hence, Glick Schiller (2005) argues that long-distance nationalists' engagement is inherently characterised by a political project.

Reinforcing the constructivist framework, I argue that long-distance nationalism is not an organic process evolving out of people's feelings of belonging, but the product of mobilisation fuelled by resources. In the case of state-affiliated diasporas, such resources are most often provided by the state, whereas in the case of diasporas emerging in opposition to the state, these are frequently administered by the elite. As Alexander Betts and Will Jones (2015) assert, diasporas are dynamic entities that are politically contingent and are often organised for specific ends by what they call 'external actors'. Therefore, their durability, content, and lifecycles are principally determined not by the inherent qualities of the diaspora itself, but rather, by the 'elite animators' who fuel the diasporas through resources. As Alejandra explained, many people have the will to make a difference in Venezuela, but the reason she was

successful in setting up a diaspora organisation was that her dedication was paired with the means that enabled her to do it. Highly qualified with sought-after expertise, Alejandra was transferred to the UK by her company two decades ago, where she decided to stay to ensure that her daughter would not have to experience the horrors of the socialist regime. She remarried in the UK and became part of a well-connected elite with access to a network of medical professionals who have been instrumental in facilitating the delivery of medical aid to Venezuela.

Resources can condition not only diaspora creation, but also diaspora participation. In some cases, this means that diaspora stances do not represent the majority of emigrants, who might find themselves constrained to cultural communities without any direct influence on the home country. I met Rosa at Vínculos, a charity that provides free activities for a pan-Latin American audience. Hearing about my research, the ex-journalist and mother of two told me she was struggling to find her place within the Venezuelan diaspora. While she was keen to offer some of her limited time as a volunteer, she complained that there was not a single event that was not simultaneously a fundraiser, and, in her current situation, entrance fees represented a boundary. She emphasised that while she indeed agreed that Venezuela needed support, she believed that the majority of emigrants were also victims in need of help. Therefore, she withdrew to cultural communities, where she could share home-cooked arepas, dance Venezuelan dances, and allow her children to practice Spanish, but through which she could not influence Venezuela in a meaningful way.

While I describe the relationship between the Venezuelan state and its West-bound emigrant population in terms of ‘diaspora disengagement’, I acknowledge that the

Venezuelan state does provide some limited support to certain emigrants. The first time I set foot inside the Bolívar Hall, the Venezuelan Consulate's event room, was a few months into my fieldwork. I had visited the building earlier to check for signs of activity, but my participants warned me that cultural life was absent within its walls. However, one day, Inés, my Chavista informant, distributed an invitation to the screening of the graduation documentaries of her cohort of film makers, scheduled to occur at the venue. I scrutinised the event named 'Four Films to Change the World', but could not find any reference to Venezuela.

Instead, I discovered that it raised funds for a charity in support of Saharawi people from Western Sahara. Soon after, Inés advertised the screening of her own film, which she shot on a visit to Venezuela. The description of the movie revealed a very optimistic picture of the Venezuelan situation, claiming that despite the crisis, which was triggered by US sanctions, the country is experiencing an economic boom, partially thanks to its resourceful population. However, the ticketing page stated that the proceedings would help a Venezuelan agrarian collective presented in the documentary. Given that Venezuela denies the existence of a crisis and tries to block any kind of humanitarian aid, I wondered how she got away with this. Then, about a fortnight before the screening, she notified us that the venue had changed to her back garden.

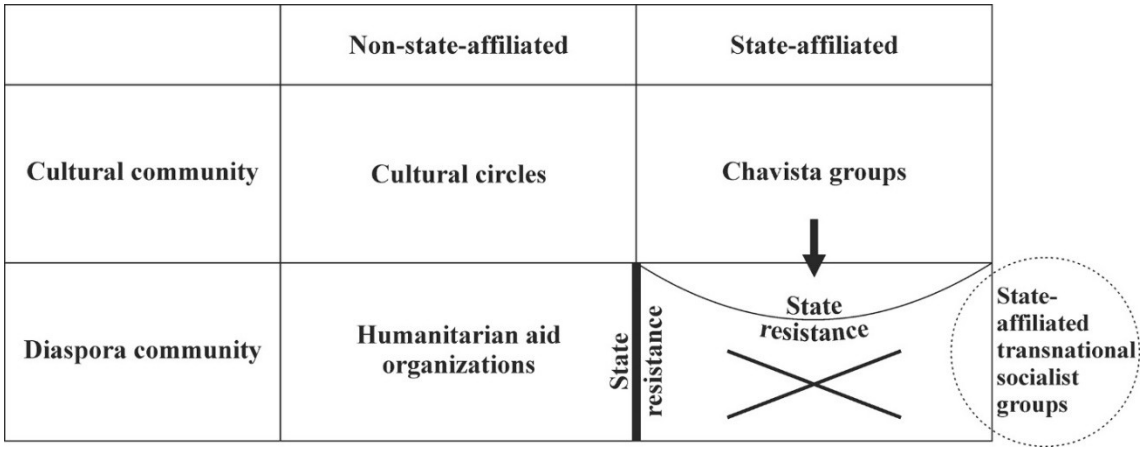


Table 2. The internal stratification and evolution
of the Venezuelan migrant community in London.

In Table 2, I rely on the same analytical categories as in the Hungarian case to make sense of the internal stratification of the Venezuelan migrant community. The presence of well-defined non-state-affiliated Venezuelan diaspora communities that distinguish themselves from cultural communities is obvious. Even if most people cannot participate in them due to financial constraints and opt for cultural communities instead, many of them aspire to. The state curbs dialogue with its West-bound migrants, thus state-affiliation is rare but can be gained in exceptional cases by people my participants called 'enchufados' [literally plugged in, figuratively someone aligned with the regime]. However, it seems that as soon as their proposed activities take on too much of a diasporic character through homewards aid, the state withdraws its support – which I illustrated in the table with 'state resistance' –, thereby limiting the extent to which meaningful collaboration in support of Venezuela and its people is possible. I indicated 'state-affiliated transnational socialist groups' as showing convergence with diasporas, which I will elaborate on in the 'ideological citizenship' section of this chapter. First, however, I will further problematise processes of diaspora (dis)engagement to understand whom, how, and under what circumstances the two states extend diaspora subjectivity to and whom they prefer to exclude.

Inclusion and exclusion in diaspora membership[4]

"You know how small our building is. If more and more people started coming, it would be impossible to squeeze everybody in. No, our aim has never been to involve everybody, but to identify key people who are aligned with our goals and get them to replicate our message in their circles." – was the response of the Hungarian Diaspora Diplomat to my question of how they make sure that the state's diaspora engagement reaches every Hungarian migrant. As the statement illustrates, there is a clear preference for certain people over others as targets, which means that the Hungarian diaspora outreach selectively engages people.

In this sense, space functions as both a critical resource and a mechanism of control in diaspora politics. As physical venues clearly separate 'inside' from 'outside', they help reinforce who is included and who is excluded. Non-state-affiliated groups often lacked access to formal venues, relying instead on private homes or ethnic businesses: VeNidito teamed up with Arepana and VeneHelp's gatherings were organised at Mesa Criolla, with the costs of consumption further limiting access to participation. Yet, the absence of dedicated spaces also offered freedom of having to align with pre-assigned values. In contrast, state-sponsored programs in both cases introduced a degree of surveillance. Hungary subsidised the provision of institutional spaces but facilitators, like the ones who used to be housed within Pannónika acted as vigilant pairs of eyes. Similarly, at the Hungarian weekend school, volunteers would obsessively hang banners

[4] Some parts of this section appear in my article Molnár, J. (2024) 'Diasporas Intertwined: The Role of Transborder Hungarians in Hungary's Diaspora Engagement', *Populism & Politics*. European Center for Populism Studies. 20 December.

before each event declaring state sponsorship explaining, *"You never know who might turn up, and we'll get in trouble if it's not there!"*.

State investment also granted the state symbolic and physical access. After one Sunday mass, a crew from a pro-regime Hungarian broadcaster arrived to film a reportage on the Queen's death. I agreed to be interviewed, but the conversation quickly turned towards political questions, like my thoughts on Hungarian politicians' safety who were coming to attend the funeral. This prompted unease among attendees and disapproval of my willingness to act as a respondent. In my interview with Pannónika's director, he explained that while he could not formally refuse state-affiliated media, he deliberately insisted on interviews taking place outside, with the building kept out of frame. In doing so, he maintained an appearance of cooperation while subtly protecting the autonomy of the space.

In constructivist analyses of diaspora, there is growing recognition that diaspora engagement by home states largely impacts diaspora communities' cohesion. Relevant studies also highlight diasporas' fragmented nature (e.g. Sinatti and Horst, 2015), which suggests that diaspora outreach schemes cannot – and in fact do not even attempt to – engage whole emigrant populations. Therefore, as Gamlen (2006) proposes, they instead operate by selectively engaging certain groups over others based on pre-defined objectives. Acknowledging that criteria for inclusion and exclusion might vary and intersect, this section focuses on one key dimension central to both case studies: ethnicity. For the purpose of my analysis, I define ethnicity as the organising criterion for a group of people who share the same descent, which might manifest in cultural, racial, or linguistic features regardless of citizenship. Through the study of everyday practices

of inclusion and exclusion, I will explore ethnicity's role in diaspora membership to dissect how home-state ideologies dictate different standards for embracing or rejecting potential diaspora subjects.

Home states play a paramount role in shaping how ethnically diverse citizens relate to one another, both within and beyond the home country, and this in turn influences their potential to constitute diaspora communities. In Carolin Fischer's (2015) study of Afghans in the UK and Germany, she found that individuals rarely related to each other based on the formal administrative unit of the country they left behind – instead, their feelings of belonging were conditioned by a variety of identity categories, amongst which Fischer highlights family and socio-economic background, ethnicity, and political affiliations as the most crucial. However, she also notes that "ethnicity only gained significance as a category of difference among Afghans in the diaspora after the onset of the 'ethnicization of politics' (Schetter, 2005) in wartime Afghanistan. Ethnicity as a subject of warfare and political rhetoric was extended to the diaspora, prompting instances of ethnic divisions and segregation of wider communities. Such contingencies reify continuous formation and re-formation of diasporas." (p. 182). Fischer's ethnography thus underscores the importance of understanding the role of the state in deploying ethnicity as a diaspora-organising category.

It was my first visit to Pannónika, where people came together for a May Ball. As I did not know anyone, I booked a randomly assigned seat. Once everybody had arrived, we took our places at our table and did a round of introductions. When it was my turn, my short monologue quickly prompted one of my tablemates to jokingly comment: *"We can hear from your accent that you are not from beyond the borders, but don't worry, we will still*

talk to you!" I suddenly realised that at my table of 14, I was the only person who had migrated from within the official borders of Hungary. As I later found out, many of the people present never lived in Hungary and some of them did not hold Hungarian citizenship.

According to Rogers Brubaker (1996), there are two types of diasporas: those that emerge by people crossing boundaries and those that are formed by boundaries crossing people. When the Trianon Treaty that closed World War I in 1920 detached two thirds of Hungary's territory, 3.3 million ethnically Hungarian people found themselves outside the borders overnight. Beyond the loss of people and territories, the cultural impact was also significant. Myra A. Waterbury (2010) emphasises the shock to the nation's cultural identity caused by the loss of Transylvania, considered the cradle of Hungarian civilisation, with Transylvanian rural populations perceived as the carriers of 'real', 'archaic' and 'authentic' Hungarian culture (p. 32). It is partially for this reason that the Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad highlights their contribution "to the universal Hungarian culture [as] invaluable" (p. 12).

Transborder Hungarians have been pivotal to the functioning of emigrant-diaspora communities and with that, they have fulfilled an important role in Fidesz's nation building efforts. The inter-generational trauma of being removed from Hungary despite a strong consciousness as Hungarians has made this group keen to embrace the state's nationalist agenda. Thus, they could be mobilised to advance the regime's goals, not least when Fidesz decided to turn its attention to Hungary's emigrated population. Since emigrant-diaspora engagement was first introduced in 2010, the majority of Kőrösi facilitators have been transborder Hungarians, who have fervently disseminated

Hungarian culture amongst Hungarians from Hungary, in the process passing on their unique patriotic perspectives. As I explained in Chapter 2, while emigrants were historically cast as traitors who had failed to fulfil their obligations to Hungary, transborder Hungarians have consistently been framed as loyal victim communities. By placing them at the heart of diaspora schemes and applauding their preservation of national consciousness despite decades under oppressive neighbouring regimes, the Hungarian state communicates its expectations of emigrants abroad.

Nonetheless, in the majority of cases, transborder Hungarians' membership in emigrant-diasporas does not result from the Hungarian state's efforts, but from their own will. In fact, as Tamás Kiss and Gergő Barna (2013) highlight, transborder Hungarians increasingly fail to consider Hungary as the primary destination of emigration and instead, tend to venture further afield – for example, to the UK –, skipping any direct engagement with the Hungarian state. However, their involvement in diaspora organisations still occurs within the dominant Fidesz discourse on transborder Hungarians' role in the nation that largely pre-determines their reception, place, and the scope of their influence in state-affiliated diasporas. Due to their unique positioning, they are agents that rewrite the dynamics of diaspora organisations by their mere presence and participation, which highlights them as key players in the Hungarian state's diaspora project.

Central to diaspora politics is a particular understanding of which groups of people constitute the nation. As Katherine Verdery (1994) explains, the term 'nation' can denote a connection known as citizenship, characterised by shared sovereignty rooted in political participation. However, in its other meaning, it is synonymous with ethnicity.

In this sense, a nation comprises individuals who share a common language, history, or cultural identity. A unique characteristic of how the nation is understood in the Hungarian context is that since membership is assigned on an ethnic basis, the polity does not equal the nation. This, in turn, influences how the diaspora is conceptualised. As Christian Joppke (2005) emphasises, right-wing nationalist parties engage co-ethnic populations abroad to sustain the dominant national group's claims over the state. As Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated at the 9th plenary session of the Hungarian Diaspora Council, "Hungarians can only be replaced with Hungarians", a claim which highlights ethnic homogeneity as a desired feature of the nation. This is also expressed in the Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad (2013) document, which defines the principal goals of diaspora engagement as the reversal of assimilatory tendencies and the prevention of intermarriages.

This push was felt in London in various ways. As part of Hungary's efforts to augment the number of children born to Hungarian parents, young families in the diasporas have been incentivised to return. However, the parents of Hungarian children born out of racially mixed marriages have often recounted feeling less desired. Their fear was confirmed by the comment of the head of a state-affiliated Hungarian weekend school on the unease he felt when parents would book in their kids saying they would bring Tomika or Lacika [typical Hungarian boys' names] and they would turn up with 'a half-Black kid'. Nonetheless, the most explicit discrimination I experienced was directed at Roma people, with the leader of a state-affiliated organisation talking about their priorities in the following words: *"We help anybody without any exceptions, there is no preference given… well, OK, maybe apart from 'gipsy' people. For example, there was this woman who wanted help because she could not feed her kids, and she was in an*

abusive relationship, but she already had another baby on the way. I did not help her. I felt that she had put herself in that situation. Serves her right for having so many kids." In this instance, rather than extending the empathy the leader deemed due to any compatriot in need, his response was shaped by the stereotype that Roma people are culturally distinct from Hungarians and have large families primarily to exploit state subsidies.

In the case of Venezuela, the distinction between ethnic and civic nation is less evident. Gabriel Andrade (2020) contends that in Latin America, the concept of the nation has traditionally been civic, understood to consist of legal citizens irrespective of their origins. Irene Bloemraad (2007) argues that countries defining themselves according to the 'unity in diversity' label tend to endorse this approach. However, Anderson (1983) proposes that Latin American nationalism embodies an approach to the nation that builds on the collective experience of being subject to an oppressive imperial power. In the case of the Venezuela that emerged out of Chávez's rule, which relies on an overwhelming emphasis on Bolívar as the liberator from colonial rule, post-colonialism and antagonism towards the white elite came to be inextricably interlinked.

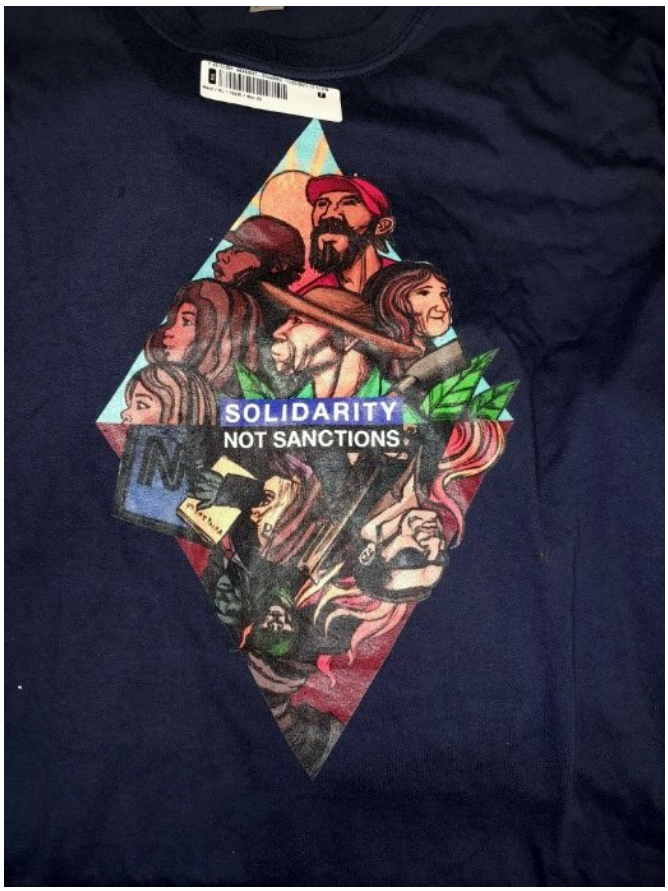
Being the first president of Latin America to declare himself of African descent (Abbas, 2013), when Chávez came into power in 1999, he started a 'new politics of authentic decolonialisation'. He fought to eliminate higher classes so that wealth and power could be redistributed, which also meant standing up to white power so that black and indigenous people could thrive. According to Janvieve Williams Comrie (2013), beyond social inclusion and an attempt to eradicate all forms of oppression, Chávez's project was to implement a real power shift in the region. This included reaching out to people

of African descent not only in Venezuela, but in countries like Haiti and even the United States to support their strife for social, economic, and cultural rights, which can be understood as efforts of non-nation-based diaspora engagement.

A DNA study conducted in 2008 estimated that Venezuela's population is composed of approximately 60.6% European, 23% Amerindian, and 16.3% African genetic ancestry (Godinho, 2008), with the current ethnic make-up of the country emerging only partially from the country's colonial attachment to Spain and being largely the result of conscious efforts to 'whiten' the population throughout the better part of the country's history. Whether it was justifiable according to a logic of decolonialisation or not, the white elite has suffered under 21st century socialism. Their power was suddenly questioned, and they lost assets due to hyperinflation, which could result in a complete class shift if people did not opt for a solution like emigration promptly enough. A lot of Venezuelans with secondary European passports decided to relocate to their ancestral homeland, with the Venezuelan emigrant community in London becoming constituted mostly of white people of European heritage.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Venezuelan diaspora scene in London developed along the dichotomy of elites of European descent gathering in opposition to the state and the state supporting initiatives that placed non-white people into positions of power. The sole cultural event organised at the Bolívar Hall welcoming broader public participation during my year of fieldwork was an Afro-Venezuelan drumming workshop and I was also intrigued to find that my Chavista participant Ines used an avatar picture on social media that illustrated her as a Black lady despite her distinctively mestizo look. The divide between the 'loyal Black and indigenous citizens'

and the ‘corrupt white elite’ was further reinforced by the T-shirts sold at a Patria Bolivariana gathering that show white people as the corrupt elite and ethnic minorities as the key to Venezuela’s future.



Picture 7. A T-shirt sold at Patria Bolivariana’s meeting.

Processes of exclusion and inclusion in both Hungary and Venezuela are deeply bound up with populist discourse. Populism rests on the premise that society is divided into two opposing, homogeneous groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). In Hungary, populism’s emphasis on the ‘voice of the people’ is closely tied to the nation, portrayed as a community sharing a common life. In contrast, Venezuelan populism centres on the shared experience of colonial oppression and its legacies. Much populist rhetoric focuses on defending the nation: as ‘aliens’ threaten its

purity, 'the people' must be protected. In Hungary, this means guarding the nation against those seen as obstructing ethnically based nation-building efforts. In parallel, in Venezuela, the rhetoric invokes protection from the 'corrupt capitalist elite', which often includes West-bound emigrants. Thus, populism, as a tool of isolation aligns well with the restrictive ideologies of nationalism and socialism respectively, serving as a key mechanism for the ideologically guided selective engagement of emigrated citizens. In the closing section of this chapter, I develop the idea further that selective engagement is ideologically governed, arguing that both states practice what I call 'ideological citizenship', which consists of excluding some citizens while including non-citizens if they align with these populist ideologies – in one case ethnic nationalist and, in the other, socialist. I thereby bring attention to a so far largely overlooked process whereby non-citizens are incorporated into the diaspora project.

Ideological citizenship

It was the day of the anti-imperialist rally in Venezuela and a solidarity gathering had been organised at the Bolívar Hall. When I entered the building, I was welcomed by Rodrigo, a man from Peru whom I had previously met at another solidarity event in support of Venezuela at the Marx House. When he recognised me, he jovially smiled: *"I am supposed to be checking your bag, but there is no need for it - I know you are one of us."* This confused me. One of them? One of whom? Supporters of Venezuela? Supporters of the Venezuelan regime? Socialists? Venezuelans? My confusion was deepened even further by the welcome speech of the Venezuelan Ambassador: *"You are at home here; the house of Bolívar is your home. [...] We Venezuelans, we don't talk of*

the death of Chávez, but about the scattering of the seeds of Chávez, and as you can see, these seeds are now everywhere for inspiration." The seed metaphor reminded me of the dispersion of diasporas. However, when I looked around, I saw that just like at every other pro-regime event, the room was filled with a mix of British and international attendees and despite my eager networking attempts, I failed to identify more than a few Venezuelans. It made me think of the desperate endeavours of my Venezuelan informants to find a venue for their events. How was it possible that they, as citizens, were not welcome, but I was?

Alejandra identified the systematic communication of non-pertinence to ideologically non-aligned citizens as a unique product of 21st century socialism: *"The polarization that Chávez produced in Venezuela was something I have never seen before. […] For example, Chávez on TV every week on Sunday would deprecate, insult, for hours, sometimes 8 hours in a row, people who opposed him, people like me. So, I was called squalid, subject of the empire, evil, all the possible epithets you can imagine."* The impossibility of establishing dialogue with the state inspired Venezuelan diaspora organisations to look for their own allies and soon, the adoption of non-citizens as part of the diaspora became an ethnographic commonplace. The token ceremony of turning foreigners into Venezuelans – or rather, non-state-aligned Venezuelans – was given to people who were considered to have invested significant time and energy into helping the Venezuelan community achieve its goals. They were sometimes as elaborate as reading out a whole citizenship oath, adorning the person with Venezuelan items of clothing, and endowing them with a custom-made Venezuelan identity document.



Pictures 8. and 9. A hat with the Venezuelan flag featuring seven stars and a Venezuelan ID card – gifts I received from Venezuelan diaspora organisations for being in alignment with their values.

"We would like to offer this present to two people who feel, think, and act as true Venezuelans and therefore deserve to be treated as official members of the Venezuelan community." – announced the founder of VeneHelp before handing me and the British treasurer of the organisation our respective packages. The hat hiding under the colourful crepe paper was a highly symbolic gesture. The Venezuelan flag printed on its front featuring only seven stars was no longer the official flag of Venezuela: in 2006, an eighth star was added to honour the wish of the country's national hero Simón Bolívar to represent the historical province of Guyana. As an informant explained to me, since the new flag came to signify the socialist regime, people felt their national symbol had been expropriated. Therefore, they made the old flag of seven stars the symbol of anti-regime demonstrations to communicate that the country belonged to them as well.

The hat seemed to possess magical powers. As soon as I started wearing it, opposition Venezuelans perceived me as ideological allies. At the marketplace where I worked, a Venezuelan girl at a different stall who would not normally make an effort to talk to me shouted out to me as soon as she saw me: *"Hey, come here, I love your hat!"* As I

approached her counter, she leaned forward to count the stars to confirm what she had already suspected: *"Seven, so you are one of us!"*

Processes of both state-affiliated and non-state-affiliated groups incorporating non-citizens could not be explained solely through diaspora (dis)engagement. As my fieldwork progressed, I grew more and more interested in what function these 'outsiders' served in the diaspora project if one of the denominators of diasporas was 'dispersion from a well-defined territory' (e.g. Gamlen, 2008) or indeed, if these groups could be called diasporas. The scene I witnessed at the Bolívar Hall was analytically complex as it did not fit traditional definitions of diaspora, but there was still something diaspora-like about how people self-identified and stayed invested in a specific state's affairs, sometimes even envisioning Venezuela as their utopic homeland.

At another event, I met a girl who was struggling to contribute to the conversation when it turned to Spanish. I asked her where she was from and avoiding my question, she told me she identified as Venezuelan. I must have looked perplexed as she quickly added: *"I believe in the socialist project, so I feel more Venezuelan than anything else!"* At the same meeting, a young Portuguese boy's ideological initiation ceremony was being prepared: although he was barely twenty, he had been actively involved in promoting the ideas of socialism for over half a decade. Now, members of the pro-regime circle were organising his first trip to Venezuela to help him have the much-longed-for encounter with the system he ardently believed in. The 'rite of passage' trip, they told me, would mark his transformation into a true Venezuelan.

A comparable process characterised the Hungarian state's nation-building efforts, but within its frames, instead of distributing symbolic membership in the nation, the state

endowed people with real nationality documents. According to a communication by Zsolt Semjén Deputy Prime Minister, 1,175,934 new citizenships have been allocated to members of the diaspora between 2011 and 2024 (Prime Minister's Office, 2024) – a striking number compared to the 9.6 million population of the country. Beyond transborder Hungarians, this process benefited second and third-generation migrants, who, in many cases, have never been to Hungary, did not speak Hungarian, and could have as little Hungarian ancestry as one great-grandparent. Kőrösi facilitators were key in identifying potential candidates, disseminating information relevant for application, and helping people prepare for the corresponding language-exam. As such, access to the opportunity was conditioned by previous involvement in state-affiliated diaspora organisations and thus, alignment with the regime's goals.

Strikingly, while Hungary relied on those allegedly of Hungarian heritage around the world for ideological support, Chávez enfranchised immigrants from within the region when, between 2004 and 2006, in a fast-track process, "more than 420,000 foreigners, many of them formerly undocumented immigrants, were granted Venezuelan nationality […] carried out by way of large-scale naturalization ceremonies" (Schwarz, 2016, p. 33). Unfolding within the framework of the 'Misión Identidad' [Identity Mission] programme, the process "not only gave these individuals access to citizenship rights but also made sure the government did not lose valuable voters in its favour" (pp. 47-48) in the lead-up to the 2006 elections, thereby "morphing the demos" (Bauböck, 2015).

To explain the logic behind these processes, I propose the concept of 'ideological citizenship'. Ideological citizenship describes states whose primary motivation for engaging people across borders is to mobilise them along ideological lines. In and of

itself, this is not a novel phenomenon. Adamson (2012) highlights the importance of political ideologies as an organising tool for diasporas: “During episodes of diasporic politics, political ideologies and identities are deployed as a means of uniting disparate (often migration-based) networks and identities into coherent transnational identity networks at the level of the international system. A focus on the mobilisation process elucidates how political identities and ideologies act as the ‘glue’ that holds together diasporas in world politics” (p. 33). However, what is unique about my concept is its recognition that disregarding citizenship, these states embrace those individuals who adhere to the ideological stances represented by them or represent alliance with ideological principles in other ways and this alignment becomes the primary catalyst for engagement. It is important to highlight that despite what the name might suggest, ‘ideological citizenship’ is not a citizenship concept: rather, the term was chosen to reflect the citizen-like inclusion of ideological allies.

Within this framework, the principal aim of diaspora mobilisation is to uphold ideologically driven regimes. States practicing ‘ideological citizenship’ do not create outreach programmes in hopes of economic gain, but in order to strengthen and legitimise their power by nurturing a group of ideological allies. Hence, adopting state-proposed diasporic subjectivity often means aligning oneself with the dominant political identity. Alan Gamlen, Michael Cummings and Paul Vaaler (2019) distinguish amongst tapping, embracing, and governing approaches that states might take towards their diasporas. The tapping approach is inspired by the resources inherent in the diaspora, the embracing approach by the aim of crafting a political identity aligned with the home state and thereby achieving domestic goals, and the governing approach by the ambition to extend control over the emigrant population. Both the Hungarian and Venezuelan

states' diaspora policies seem to be motivated by an embracing approach, albeit in different ways. In the case of Venezuela, diaspora engagement functions as a highly selective process that has as its priority the expression of the Bolivarian mission of decolonialisation. The repudiation of the tapping approach, dismissed as an imperialist tool, is expressed through efforts to obstruct all forms of aid from the diaspora and through the symbolic uplifting of the most economically disadvantaged segments of the emigrant population.

Embracing is also at the centre of the Hungarian state's goal of building a 'nation empire' that spans the globe, with the existing tapping and governing elements subjugated to the principal goal of reattaching ethnically pertinent people to Hungary. Szabolcs Pogonyi (2015) argues that the Hungarian outreach was devised with the aim to folklorise the emigrated population in order to strengthen Fidesz's nationalist image. He asserts that with the rise of the far-right radical Jobbik party, the Orbán government started being challenged from the right and therefore, emigrant-diaspora engagement, along with the incorporation of transborder Hungarians in the nation was a tool of regaining voters of nationalist sentiments. Thus, he suggests that the diaspora has been used not as a concrete but a symbolic resource. His claim is confirmed by the fact that the amount of money invested in the country's nation building efforts almost equals the remittances received, which means that the economic gain deriving from the diaspora is negligible (Nemzetpolitikai Eredmények, 2018; World Bank, 2023).

According to 'ideological citizenship', 'nation' becomes understood as a transnational ideological community that is not equivalent to polity. Its organising principles are themselves ideologically driven and correspond to how the respective states

conceptualise the ‘nation’. The Hungarian nationalist project operates along ethnic lines. As Adamson (2012) suggests: “the use of nationalism by political entrepreneurs operating transnationally creates a classic form of diasporic politics. That is, nationalism is a political ideology that assumes a degree of particularism and boundedness” (p. 34). Nationalism, she adds, “merges a universalist imperative – the linking of cultural groupings to demarcated territorial spaces governed by centralising institutional configuration” (p. 35). As people’s label as ethnically Hungarian is fixed, their desirability as national subjects stays constant throughout their lifetimes. Therefore, to scaffold its ideology, the state only needs to map out ethnically Hungarian people, attach them to the home country, and incentivise them to think of themselves along national lines.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are manifestations of transnationalism characterised by more universalistic ideologies, which include transnationally organised political movements like socialism. According to Adamson (2012), leftist movements are hard to classify as diasporic per se: while they function in similar ways to diasporas, they are defined by “shared beliefs as opposed to a shared identity” (p. 34). Based on Eric Hobsbawm (1989), she asserts that “revolutionary socialism was inherently an international movement based on transnational mobilization by [revolutionary] political entrepreneurs” (p. 38). Still, something different seems to be at play here. In previous international versions of socialism, in order to be a socialist, one had to be an internationalist and shun the nation-state. However, in this case, membership is tied directly to an affinity with Venezuela.

I argue that as the Venezuelan state's actions are aimed at fuelling the spread of the ideas of 21st century socialism through the creation of a 'transnational socialist community', which celebrates Venezuela as a leading representative of the ideology. This, in turn legitimates Venezuela's existence as an ideologically based autocracy. For such purposes, the regime cannot map out people along fixed labels like Hungary and hence, it needs to ensure that people's political orientation stays aligned. Therefore, beyond efforts of ethnic decolonialisation, it operates on a civic basis, providing access to everybody who pledges to defend Venezuelan political institutions and their principles. As such, participation is marked by a degree of fluidity, as illustrated by the case of the filmmaker who was welcome when her event aligned with the state's ideology, but ostracised when her activities conflicted with the regime's principles.

I do not suggest categorising transnational socialist communities as diasporas. However, I do underline that their existence is essential to consider from the perspective of my study for two different reasons. Firstly, I argue that their Venezuelan members can adopt and cultivate diaspora subjectivity through participation in these groups, which may subsequently extend to their engagement in other diasporic spheres. Secondly, I contend that their operation can impact the functioning of non-state-affiliated diaspora groups. While 'ideological citizenship' is primarily a feature pertinent to the state, as I illustrated above, it can be assumed as a strategy by non-state-affiliated diasporas too. As the state increasingly disenfranchises the subsection of the population that predominantly constitutes the migrant population in the UK and replaces them with 'outsiders', these dynamics prompt non-state-affiliated groups to ground themselves within a global network of progressive liberals by embracing foreigners. Consequently, the two processes cannot be fully understood unless analysed in tandem.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the diverse forms diaspora membership can take, providing a detailed analysis of how diaspora subjectivity might develop through processes initiated, influenced, or impeded by the home state. Both the Hungarian and Venezuelan cases attested to emigrants' ongoing resistance to align with what the state proposes. In the case of Hungary, the state actively incentivised the cultivation of a homewards orientation, in the process transforming organisations that previously operated as cultural communities into diaspora groups. While some emigrants are willing to respond to the call, they often do so motivated by a utilitarian approach that may not translate into the anticipated political support – although one could argue that fostering diaspora membership is, in itself, the primary political objective. The Venezuelan regime's objective regarding its West-bound population of white heritage is characterised by an endeavour to discourage homeward orientation – a process I termed 'diaspora disengagement'. Nevertheless, significant efforts are mobilised, particularly by upper-class migrants, to reclaim their entitlement to their home country. Such engagement creates an embattled relationship between the state and its emigrants in the Venezuelan case and a surface alignment in the Hungarian one that has much tension boiling beneath.

I was also interested in the criteria for assigning and claiming diaspora membership. Adopting a constructivist framework, I argued for the need to acknowledge diasporas as political projects and therefore, as being guided by political goals. I illustrated that in the Hungarian case, ethnic homogeneity was a key diaspora-organising principle, while

in the Venezuelan case, civic conformity came hand-in-hand with that state's decolonialisation efforts, largely rooted in ethnic paradigms. I further explored the previously overlooked topic of the foreigners' presence in the diaspora project. The comparison highlighted a remarkable similarity between the logic behind the respective processes, which I called 'ideological citizenship'.

My concept of 'ideological citizenship' is a core contribution to diaspora literature as it describes previously little studied processes of states (dis)engaging people transnationally – extending beyond citizens – in order to uphold ideologically driven regimes. Such tendencies are crucial to acknowledge both analytically and politically as extremist governments increasingly rely on transnationalist strategies to find supporters and legitimate their existence as their popularity amongst their own citizens wanes. It also anticipates potential future developments that warrant attention, as the growing de-territorialisation of states may lead to future states being organised less by geographic territory and more along ideological lines.

Chapter 4 – Ties that bind

Introduction

> *Out of all the places in this world, I feel safest in my city, Caracas. This might come as a surprise given that it is ranked amongst the most dangerous places on Earth. But let me tell you of when my brother got kidnapped. At first, we panicked, but once we reached out to relatives and friends, they started the search and within 24 hours, we did not only find him but also got him back. Although the event ultimately triggered our emigration, it also made me realise how strong and safe I am due to my personal network.*

The story was shared by Yulimar, a Venezuelan professional in her thirties, during a public speaking workshop organised for international participants. While the Hungarian participants present associated the prompt of 'where I feel safest' to physical locations, Yulimar equated it to kin and personal connections, juxtaposing the Venezuelan capital's violence with the resilience of her social network, which stayed her stronghold even when she was thousands of kilometres away. Her case was not unique: many Venezuelans narrated their migration in deeply relational terms. Conversely, Hungarians often approached migration as a rite of passage whereby one became a fully autonomous individual.

This chapter investigates how kinship and social networks shape diaspora subjectivity. It argues that what is often framed as diaspora action is, in many cases, purely a manifestation of people being invested in relationships across borders, highlighting diaspora participation not only as political or economic engagement but also as a moral and relational expression of personhood. This raises several key questions. What kind of person arrives in Britain? And if migration brings to the surface different constructions of what it means to be a person, shaped not only by social imaginaries and cultural

expectations, but also the lived conditions abroad, how do these factors inform what diaspora practices people will engage in? In turn, what does diaspora participation reveal about what kind of persons Venezuelans and Hungarians are, and how their sense of self is linked with family, community, and nation? Under what conditions do certain models of personhood become compelling, possible, or necessary, and how are these shaped by migration itself?

My inquiry follows the previous chapter's focus on diaspora as primarily framed through national imaginaries – organised, understood, and practised with reference to the nation-state. As Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) argue, social science has largely internalised the assumptions emerging from the logic of the modern nation-state, treating national frameworks as taken-for-granted categories. This has led to an analytical bias toward examining social processes within national boundaries, often overlooking cross-border connections. Critiques of this paradigm underline the need for alternative frameworks. Ghassan Hage (2005) challenges the centrality of the 'imagined national community' in understanding diaspora and shifts attention to the transnational social networks that connect places of origin and destination. Similarly, Jørgen Carling (2008) posits that migration extends kinship ties across geographic distances, giving rise to transnational social fields governed by shared norms and expectations that exert normative pressures on migrant behaviour. In this chapter, I argue that while migrants may speak and think in national terms, their actions targeting the state are often primarily driven by personal connections and the moral obligations tied to them. I approach these obligations as inseparable from the material and affective practices through which personhood is constituted.

Personhood refers to the culturally constructed and socially conferred attributes, capacities, and markers that define one's moral standing and legal entitlements within a given society (Poole, 2002). Put simply, it asks how particular cultural and historical contexts construct, recognise, and value human beings as 'persons', and how those constructions shape social life. As Susan Reynolds Whyte (1990) emphasises, a key theme is the intimate connection between the body and social identity: how individuals come to be recognised as moral actors through embodied social participation. Anthropologists argue that models of personhood vary across contexts. In 'the West', the person tends to be viewed as bounded, and self-authoring, while in some other cultural settings, it is imagined intersubjectively, with one becoming a 'full' person through satisfying social roles (Appell-Warren, 2014). For example, Marilyn Strathern (1988) describes the Melanesian person as 'dividual', composed of parts of others, and always situated in social relationships.

These models are neither static nor mutually exclusive: they can shift, coexist, and be mobilised strategically. Anita Jacobson-Widding (1990) highlights a fundamental tension between the culturally constructed ideology of personhood and the subjective experience of selfhood, noting that these dimensions often produce dissonance. Building on this, Laura Appell-Warren (2014) proposes a distinction between socio-centric and ego-centric aspects of personhood. While the socio-centric aspect emphasises the individual as a moral person embedded in collective responsibilities, the ego-centric one prioritises individual agency. This highlights that the imposed and inhabited are intimately intertwined. Furthermore, Beth Conklin and Lynn Morgan (1996) emphasise that personhood is not a one-way process and, under certain conditions, it can be diminished, withdrawn, or denied, underscoring personhood as a lifelong project,

shaped by rites of passage that reaffirm one's moral and social standing. I propose that migration is a field of moral and ontological struggle in which personhood is shaped by a constant negotiation of conflicting calls to loyalty versus autonomy and care versus detachment. In this context, I understand diaspora participation as a form of ritual: a site where migrants (re)assert their personhood within new and often uncertain social terrains.

This chapter begins by examining how migrants experience life as part of a community. Drawing on James Clyde Mitchell's (1969) definition, I understand social network as "a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the additional property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the persons involved" (p. 2). I argue that such networks become (re)activated through migration, as individuals rely on them for practical support, emotional scaffolding, and identity affirmation, especially when set against the backdrop of the socio-cultural and political environment of Britain. Yet this process is fraught with ambivalence. Venezuelan migrants blame the home state for disrupting ties and strive to revive 'venezolanidad' [Venezuelanness] in London while the growing demands of those in Venezuela often provokes distance from the Venezuelan community transnationally. Conversely, among Hungarians, distrust toward compatriots rooted in socialist times often erodes community, leading to a sense of collective failure and triggers a process I call 'alie(n)ation' whereby Hungarians measure group cohesion against nationalist narratives, leading to disillusionment.

In the second half of the chapter, I explore how diaspora activity is conditioned by relationality. Focusing on Venezuelans, I introduce the concept of 'extraction', the

overwhelming importance of achieving kin's repatriation. I argue that the inability to remove close relatives from Venezuela often cements individuals in diaspora action, while their successful repatriation distances migrants from diaspora structures. This suggests that humanitarian involvement and political support serve principally to influence the life conditions of those left behind. A kinship-based logic shapes Hungarian migrants' actions as well. While initially reluctant to embed themselves in diaspora structures, this often changes with the desire to have children, as cultural transmission is seen as the monopoly of the state. I illustrate that both Hungarians and Venezuelans are persons constituted through relations, but they emphasise family – or community – at different stages in life, shaped by distinct temporal orientations. Thus, I contend that diaspora subjectivities are not only political but ontological, rooted in how people see themselves in relation to others.

The challenge of national solidarity amongst Hungarians

I first met Bendegúz at Pannónika, where he was staying while filming a reportage on solidarity amongst Hungarians abroad. Although commissioned by a Hungarian TV channel, the topic was his own idea. From the accounts of secondary school friends who moved to Western Europe, he got the impression that they managed to thrive with limited resources because Hungarians operated as a close-knit community. Through this documentary, he hoped to showcase stories of solidarity to encourage his audience to adopt similar attitudes back home. However, almost immediately, Bendegúz's ideal began to unravel. His accommodation at Pannónika, a symbolic space of national spirit, struck him as transactional due to the steep prices. Still, he remained hopeful, excited

about the interviews he had arranged through a Facebook group called ‘Hungarians who show solidarity’. Though unfamiliar with the group, I was immediately suspicious as its name suggested a desire to set itself apart from a prevailing norm. Yet, curious about what he might discover, and him eager to prove his point, we agreed that I would join him for a day of filming.

Our first stop was a Hungarian dental clinic, which Bendegúz introduced as a hub of community life. Still, being told that no Hungarian patients were scheduled for the day, in a somewhat absurd turn of events, I had to pose as a patient for the shoot. As filming progressed, Bendegúz’s enthusiasm for the clinic’s director began to fade. Although his Facebook profile listed a Hungarian city as his place of origin, he was actually from Transylvania. This revelation unsettled Bendegúz and prompted him to label the director a gold-digger. Leaving the clinic, he muttered that finding genuine solidarity amongst ‘real Hungarians’ was harder than expected.

In-group solidarity was something many Hungarian migrants desired, but few felt satisfied with. As community cohesion functioned more as a normative ideal than an observable reality, participants frequently invoked other migrant groups as reference points for what solidarity should look like, with a recurring trope being *“If only we would stick together, we could be strong like them!”*. Polish and Romanian communities were cited as models, even if studies like Dora-Olivia Vicol’s (2019) and Anne White’s (2017) highlight similar frustrations about internal fragmentation in those groups. When Hungarian participants learned about the comparative scope of my project, many also remarked that I surely found solidarity amongst Venezuelans. Yet, the most emotionally charged comparisons were not cross-ethnic but internal.

Transborder Hungarians, particularly from Transylvania, were admired and envied, with their perceived unity seen as threatening, particularly due to the Hungarian state's preferential treatment of them within diaspora structures.

The Hungarian state has long promoted a narrative reinforcing an invisible heroic unity rooted in shared suffering from the Ottoman times till Soviet domination, fostering the idea of a transhistorical 'national kinship'. Yet, this ideological script often clashed with migrants' everyday realities, leading to tension, as Bendegúz's project exemplified. I propose the concept of 'alie(n)ation' to capture the estrangement migrants felt when illusions of nation-based solidarity promoted by nationalism were not matched by reality. The term reflects the paradox of being summoned as part of a unified nation but experiencing disillusionment when daily interactions with fellow Hungarians defy the project.

The idealised image evoked by the political category of diaspora risks flattening diversity within migrant communities. As Dominique Schnapper (1999) observes, migrants may aspire to a "mythic unity of 'the people'" (p. 237), yet such imaginaries rarely reflect the differentiated experiences of diasporic groups. Giulia Sinatti and Cindy Horst (2015) concede that while the concept of diaspora suggests a cohesive group, with those committed to the nation acting or speaking to and in the name of a unified diaspora, in reality, these communities are often profoundly divided, fail to operate unanimously, and may share more with those outside the group. Furthermore, the unity invoked as a benchmark of community worth is something the regime instrumentalises for partisan ends and to undermine the organically emerging civil society, which threatens the possibility of real solidarity.

Balázs initially came to London as a diplomat, but when I asked whether he had worked directly with Hungarians as part of the role, he replied, *"No, thank God!"*. He added that he had no interest in connecting with the local community due to a 'negative experience' in the United States. I hesitantly asked if he was comfortable sharing it, thinking it might be something traumatic, but he was eager to vent his frustration:

> *I got an opportunity to go to Washington as an intern through university, but they would not pay for accommodation. […] And then I found a Hungarian organisation in Washington and I wrote to them that I am a Hungarian university student and I would like to stay with somebody for let's say 6-7 weeks – I can even pay, but it should be something cheap, like a guest room at the place of a local Hungarian, who lived there. And nobody reacted, I got no response, and, in the end, I found a solution through an American acquaintance, who is not Hungarian. He helped and completely… he provided what I would have expected from Hungarians.*

For Balázs, indifference felt like betrayal: he had expected to be received like family, simply by virtue of shared nationality. Indeed, many migrants initially expected to rely on old acquaintances, often contacted via Facebook for the first time in many years, for extensive support, including temporary accommodation. Giving in to such demands, Ilona recalled sharing her double bed with a distant friend for a month. Such arrangements often led to disappointment, strained relationships, and complaints: guests felt let down when expectations were not fully met, whereas hosts often resented the lack of gratitude and the discomfort suffered.

For many Hungarians, the idea of community was also overcast by memories of socialism. Several scholars underline the long-lasting impact of socialism on citizens' values (Fuchs-Schündeln and Schündeln, 2015; Voigtländer and Voth, 2015; Lange, 2021). Surveillance, informant networks, and restricted freedoms eroded interpersonal trust, fostering a moral economy where people were cautious even with neighbours or

friends. Participants like Éva recalled a past in which people had to navigate viewing community both as a demand and a threat: *"Everybody is fed up with how it was in Hungary's past. Like during Kádár. If you tried to operate on your own, people told on you, and the big black car would immediately appear to take you… so people were forced to rely on each other."*

Éva first came to the UK well into her thirties, taking a sabbatical from her beloved job as a secondary school teacher after her marriage broke down. However, upon her return, she learnt that she had been dismissed – a decision she interpreted as a punishment for prioritising her autonomy. According to Éva, socialism inflicted lasting damage on people's mentality. To illustrate her point, she recounted an incident involving the British man she later married: finding a £5 note outside their church after Sunday mass, he took it back inside in case someone was looking for it. While I saw it as an act of decency, Éva attributed it to the liberal political culture of his upbringing. She placed this in contrast with what she speculated would be the 'typical Hungarian' response of keeping the money. Under socialism, she argued, people were conditioned to seek unofficial gains at the expense of others, which severed interpersonal ethics and trust. She quickly added that nowadays, this elemental fear persists in different forms: for example, in not telling one's idea to others in case they steal it, which is why, according to Éva, Hungarians do not share opportunities like jobs or rooms to rent.

Éva's account shows how personhood is shaped by moral inheritance. She admired her husband's values but felt far from embodying them herself. Her desire to 'shed her socialist skin' reflected not only shifting attitudes but also the relational possibilities she believed were available to her. While she rejected 'forced unity', she mourned the lack

of genuine solidarity, which she felt never truly existed. Her story pinpoints the enduring challenge of relating to others when the historical conditions of one's existence taught one that solidarity is dangerous. Some Hungarians interpreted their social networks from home as toxic or holding them back, and migration as a liberation. Aranka vividly captured this transformation: *"The last years in London I have spent discarding personal connections. It made me realise how many people with negative energy surrounded me before. I feel so much happier as a result."* Another informant told me she kept excluding people from her life until her son, who was raised in the UK, warned her that soon she would have nobody around her. In the context of state socialism, pragmatic individualism emerged not from selfishness but as a protective mode of personhood.

Post-1989, the rapid transition to capitalism further fractured solidarity and entrenched a Western 'cult of the individual'. Amongst Hungarians, London became a symbol of this ethos. Some saw the UK as a perfect middle ground between the US's extreme individualism and Hungary's 'provincial mentality of judgement and gossip', romanticising it as *"a place where no one raised an eyebrow if you wore pyjamas and green hair to the supermarket"*. Leslie Fesenmyer (2023) highlights that "becoming 'someone' has long been entangled with migrating 'somewhere'" (p. 28). As several analysts have noted (e.g. Kováts and Papp Z., 2016; Moreh 2014), Hungarian migrant communities often operate in markedly individualistic manners, embedded in the understanding of migration not as a collective effort, but an individual achievement and act of self-making. Migration dreams are often framed as quests for career, education, or to embrace one's LGBTQ+ identity – goals rooted in a desire to live more freely, more authentically, and on one's own terms. Individualism plays a more prominent role in

driving mobility within the EU, where the freedom of movement enables strategic migration with less reliance on strong social networks, while the proximity of a safety net to fall back on allows for greater risk-taking, standing in contrast with contexts where collective responsibility frames the journey.

When the desire for community surfaced amongst Hungarians, it was often framed less as inherent belonging and more in terms of neoliberal utility: as a means of strategically accessing opportunities and advancing in the meritocratic system of 'the West'. Adorján, one of my interlocutors, expressed deep scepticism about Hungarians' ability to function together: *"There is absolutely no solidarity, no together-thinking. It's as if everybody hated each other and wished one another unwell."* Yet, he shared with me a short story he wrote about his ideal of 'collective migration', imagining a Hungarian migrant community called 'Utopia' in 2056:

> *The Founders were young intellectual Hungarians who saw no perspective at home, so they decided to create a well-functioning micro-community for themselves in a Western city. In the end, they chose Uppsala as their headquarters, which was developing dynamically at the time. [...] An elite Hungarian intellectual community of 4–5,000 people emerged within a few years. With the help of the immigrants, Uppsala gained a significance in the world economy that belied its size.*

By presenting a productive form of solidarity, Adorján's story reflects his belief that Hungarians could have great potential if they managed to function as a community. Anthropological literature has often problematised (post-)socialist networks as mechanisms of informal exchange and corruption (e.g. Ledeneva, 1998). However, in the neoliberal present, networks are actively valorised, seen as essential to navigating labour markets. As Mark Granovetter (1973) observed, 'weak ties' are often more economically valuable than close-knit communities, especially in contexts where

opportunity circulates through social referrals. In Adorján's imaginary, solidarity is no longer an affective necessity: it is an instrumental rationale. It is precisely this shift that characterises the neoliberal re-rooting of diaspora by the state: while 'family' on the narrative level, it is a resource in practical terms.

It is important to note that it was often exactly this neoliberal approach that discouraged community building amongst Hungarian migrants. Unlike my Venezuelan participants, amongst whom joining the community characteristically meant aligning with the upper class that migrated first, among Hungarians, becoming part of the community posed the threat of a downward move. As Balázs explained: *"The dominant majority of Hungarians who live here are those who came to find a job working with their hands. So principally really the working class. And these people, I don't know and don't have connections with. Obviously, it is very hard to feel that I would constitute a community with them."* This was the context that gave rise to what Michal Garapich (2008) calls the 'migration industry': "a set of specialised social actors and commercial institutions that profit not only from human mobility but also from effective adaptation into the new environment" (p. 736). The migration industry allowed connections and resources to be monetised in the absence of those forming naturally. Originally evolving around services like job matching and help with documents, today programmes like Milestone and Endgame, which prepare students for top universities abroad, are amongst the most sought-after services offered transactionally, with the monetisation of co-national insights and contacts fuelling the sense of exploitation further.

While Hungarians expected to find individuality in the UK, what tended to strike them most was the fairness, charity, and civic-mindedness they observed in British society.

Similarly to Éva's story, simple acts of kindness from strangers, such as buying a ticket for someone on the bus who was short on change or waiting patiently when the tube experienced a technical difficulty instead of complaining, became powerful moments of reflection. Barbara recalled her arrival in such terms:

> *I remember that upon my arrival, I already knew that London and I would get on well when on the way from the airport, I lost my train ticket. […] And me, shaking with a knot in my stomach, my tears about to start flowing, told the yellow-vested person that I lost my ticket on the train. And he said, no problem love and opened the gate. And I walked out, trying to collect my jaw which had dropped to the ground. And then I was going up the stairs with my suitcase and backpack and one more bag. And two men grabbed my big suitcase and started running up the stairs with it. And it took me some seconds to realise that they had not stolen it but wanted to help!*

These moments, recounted with wonder, highlight the 'moral inferiority' of Hungarians to my participants. They reinforced a broader desire to adopt British values through integration, with association with fellow Hungarians increasingly viewed as an obstacle to that goal. Migration, in this sense, was not just about improving one's material conditions but about moral self-improvement, grounded in the shared view of Hungary as 'backwards', not only politically or economically, but also ethically.

Migration as a collective project amongst Venezuelans

"The thing I miss the most is mi casa [my house/home]*"*, murmured Rafael, hands immersed in soapy water. The remark came while washing dishes, alluding back to an earlier conversation we had, and was received somewhat haphazardly on my end. *"You mean the building?"* – I asked, unprepared for the confession that followed: *"No, the person that I was back there. I was part of a story, connected with other*

people's stories. I used to be an engineer from [removed for anonymity], *I was a son, I was a friend. Here, I am a nobody. I am from nowhere as nobody knows about my country or what is going on there and my qualifications don't matter either. It's just my sister and me, so I am a nobody. Once you get out of there, you lose who you are."* I soon understood that it was not just the physical space Rafael longed for, but the version of himself that space anchored in relation to others. His words evoked a form of ontological exile, a displacement from the social relations that sustained his personhood. This stood in stark contrast with how my Hungarian interlocutors conceptualised selfhood. For Rafael, it emerged not as a self-authored, malleable project, but something relationally distributed. While Hungarians too mourned disrupted ties, their longing for community invoked the idiom of the nation, rather than the intimate texture of kin or neighbourly life.

What complicated this feeling for my Venezuelan informants was that often, there was no real option of return. As Başak Bilecen, Markus Gamper, and Miranda Lubbers (2018) note, social networks are not static backdrops but dynamic, evolving formations that both shape and are shaped by mobility. For Venezuelans, this flux has been particularly acute. As Santiago explained, *"At one point, it was goodbye parties every single day as everybody was leaving. I do not know where home is anymore. My parents are not in Venezuela, so even if I go back, there is no home as I used to know it. My grandfather died during the pandemic, and I could not go back as Venezuela was closed, and the rest of my family is scattered all around the world."* Fernando shared similar sentiments, recalling that rituals marking the natural flow of life, like birthdays or engagements were replaced by farewell gatherings. *"There came a point when you stopped asking your friends if they were thinking about leaving and instead asked when*

and where they were going." The magnitude of dispersion was also captured by the film 'Caracas, Ciudad de Despedidas' [Caracas, City of Goodbyes], whose infamous line 'me iría demasiado' [I am dying to leave] became a generational slogan: a cry for help and aspiration intertwined.

The disintegration of home produced a deep sense of identity erosion, which migrants actively worked to reassemble. As such, family was not lost; it became a category of constructive practice. As Liliana explained, *"[Venezuelan] people tend to be close to their own, I would say. I do think that at least me and my friends, we're trying to mimic something close to a family because we all have our families far away. So, this is kind of like, well, we need to create our own basically."* According to her, this reconstruction often happened organically and effortlessly: *"I wasn't like actively looking for anything. It was just sort of happening. It fell on my lap."* Upon arrival, she moved in with a close university friend who, along with his partner and another Venezuelan, just happened to be returning to London. *"It's kind of like a plague!"* – she joked, highlighting that if you know one Venezuelan, you know many.

Familial closeness was reconstituted not through blood ties but proximity, shared experience, and national affinity, with Venezuelan connections providing the kind of practical and emotional support expected from kin. Rosa, another informant, described moving in with her husband's old friend upon arriving in London, only to begin hosting newcomers weeks after securing their own place. While many of these relationships stemmed from prior acquaintance, chance encounters also played a role. I frequently witnessed at the marketplace that if Venezuelans recognised another Venezuelan –

usually by accent – they would quickly exchange contacts, often integrating the other into existing social circles right away.

Beyond their sentimental value, communities often served as coping mechanisms. Venezuelan migration has been largely reactive, spontaneous, and chaotic. In such high-risk, high-urgency contexts, access to formal support systems is often lost, prompting migrants to flock together for economic and social resilience. As formal resources dwindled, people themselves became the key asset: a Venezuelan psychologist offered mental health support to fellow migrants, an oncologist diagnosed patients via WhatsApp, and visitors were frequently assigned with packages to deliver back to Venezuela – instances of improvised communal resource-sharing. As one informant put it: *"It's only when you have power that you can afford to become individualistic, so Venezuelans cannot afford to be individualistic. Venezuelans are like this because they need to rely on each other's help for survival."* While amongst Hungarians, a friend's migration was often perceived as a loss, for Venezuelans, it created new social capital. My conversation with Ignacio highlighted Venezuelan migration's chain-like nature, with destinations chosen based on where a contact was already established:

> Me: *"Ok, why London – what attracted you?"*
>
> Ignacio: *"It wasn't London that attracted me, it was my son who came to London."*
>
> Me: *"And why did he choose London?"*
>
> Ignacio: *"Because a friend brought him. […] A guy from Venezuela who already lived in Spain, and his parents live in London. And he told him, 'Come to London with me, my parents are there'."*

Migrants draw on collective memory and myth to make sense of displacement and belonging (Stewart, 2011; Malkki, 1995) generating affective repertoires around a

shared identity of ‘we fled as a people’. Susan Appe and Satenik Papyan (2024) assert that loss can provoke pro-social behaviour, while Johanna Vollhardt’s (2009) concept of ‘altruism born of suffering’ captures how trauma can generate solidarity. Beatriz Padilla and Magdalena López Maya (2021) observe that shared trauma unified Venezuelan migrants, thereby placing a renewed emphasis on national cohesion. As VeneHelp member Miranda explained on an online platform: *“For me, it is as if the pain of the many griefs involved in migration, of so many losses as well as remorse got transformed into a source of honour, and into a surge of solidarity and brotherhood that blurs geographical distances and those of the heart.”* Emerging from these networks, beyond practical functions, humanitarian diaspora groups became affective sanctuaries recreating the experience of home, as recounted by Romina: *“It makes me feel safe, at ease. I’m with a group where, if I ever have a problem, I know I’ll be supported. But with an English group, no – I’m nothing. Truly, I’m nothing, just one more person.”* My observations on the family-like functioning of Venezuelan diaspora organisations were also supported by the frequent use of kinship terminology: friends became ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, and community leaders functioned as stand-in ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’.

For Ignacio, the disintegration of social webs that give meaning to life was interpreted as a deliberate strategy of the Venezuelan regime to destabilise the population: *“Venezuelans always exist in a web of relations. […] These are things programmed in order to destroy the family. Or how shall I put it, if the family is the nucleus of the whole society, you have your family, your brother… but if they take this away from you, the family, what remains for you? Nothing!”* He emphasised that connecting with compatriots was a way to reclaim what was lost: *“The idea is to share [and be] transported to the old Venezuela. Not the Venezuela of today, because that doesn’t exist*

anymore. It died." In this sense, the homeland was resurrected through relationships, as emergent groups restored a sense of nationhood and offered a vision of Venezuela's post-crisis survival. If Hungarians imagined the nation as family, then for Venezuelans, family – regardless of blood ties – came to constitute the nation. While Hungarians believed that national belonging should result in familial treatment, for Venezuelans, family-like ties had to be cultivated first for the nation to emerge. Venezuelans imbued the salvaged or newly formed relationships with a sense of nationhood, giving flesh and continuity to a collectivity otherwise lost.

Consequently, 'venezolanidad' came to be idealised as a moral and political stance, with the company of Venezuelans actively sought for shared values of warmth, humility, and communal care – something pertinent to the homeland that stood in direct opposition with the cruelty of the Venezuelan regime. Some explained it to be rooted in Catholic values while others connected it to indigenous heritage or the unifying force of unrelenting crises throughout much of the country's history. Romina enthused that *"Everyone there respects and cares for each other. It's incredible. It's incredible to see people where you think, wow, this woman has had every education in the world, she's spent I don't know how many years in the United States, and yet she's so humble and noble. It leaves you speechless. That's when the essence of the Venezuelan really comes through!"*. As such, when someone returned from a visit home, after questions about safety and inflation, people were most eager to hear whether Venezuelans' communitarian spirit remained intact. The ethos was central to self-representation as well, as illustrated by the animated film 'Venezuela Inmigrante' [Venezuela Immigrant], in which the protagonist, though starving and unable to feed her children, shares her last food with a beggar in need.

Venezuelans often contrasted their communitarian spirit with what they perceived as London's individualism – a tendency also noted amongst other Latin American communities (e.g. Robins, 2020) as well as Fesenmyer (2023), whose participants moaned having to adapt to a 'morally and socially inferior' culture in the UK. In sharp contrast to the Hungarian experience, public transport came to symbolise Venezuelan moral superiority. Shock was expressed at the lack of small courtesies, such as young people not offering seats to the elderly, or the general indifference of headphone-covered commuters. Though she had not lived in Venezuela for decades, when the topic emerged, Vanessa was transported back to Caracas. She explained that as a student, she once boarded a crowded bus carrying books, and an elderly woman immediately offered to hold them so she could hold the railing. Memories of the kindness experienced made her exclaim, *"This is my Venezuela!"*. In response, someone suggested that British children are not raised properly, to which a younger Venezuelan countered that they are, only with an individualist mindset, which people agreed was conditioned from birth: *"They let them cry a lot. They really let them cry. They let the children fend for themselves however they can. And we Venezuelan women, we're very overprotective of children. We don't let them cry much. We hold them. If they want something, we do it for them. That's how we are. But here, no. Here I've noticed that the mother is more independent from the child, and the child is more independent from the mother."*

In this context, the UK was often perceived as an antagonistic force. As Magnus Marsdal (2005) argues, "at present, individualism belongs to the political right. It is seen as linked with capitalism, selfishness and liberalist economical policies... the antithesis of any notion of solidarity, common interests and collective struggle" (p. 1). Culturally grounded expectations about the self might emerge from home state

ideologies, but among my Venezuelan participants, communitarian values were not seen as stemming from socialism: rather, they believed that it was Venezuelans' deeply ingrained values that enabled socialism to take root in Venezuela. Nonetheless, staying in the UK was often seen as a threat to 'venezolanidad', with participants blaming the corrosive effect of the UK's moral code for the diaspora's fragmentation. Claudio identified two ways life in the UK had an adverse impact, beginning with what he described as the corruption of migrants' communal values: "*When I came here and asked a Venezuelan, 'How do I apply for pre-settled status?' and the other Venezuelan who's been here a while says, 'I can help you with that, I'll charge you £100.' […] 'Look, you got hit by a car? Well, I can do CPR or whatever it's called – medical attention – but it will cost.' […] You end up getting used to what you are living, and you get used to everything being a business.*"

Claudio's second concern was regarding the impact of remittances on recipients' minds: *"The Venezuelans who are in Venezuela are what we call 'pasando roncha'. It means hardship, but they are happy, living their lives. But those who are outside, for the most part, are working like a mule. They enjoy life little, because they have to dedicate themselves to their jobs and help their families in Venezuela survive."* While he emphasised that he would always support his mother, he was becoming increasingly hesitant to extend the same help to his broader social circle. His frustration crystallised around a particular incident: a friend from home had reached out saying he was going through a difficult time and asked for a loan – though Claudio noted that "*If you don't have money today, you won't have it tomorrow either.*" Claudio sent the money, only to reveal photos of the friend drinking whiskey on a beach – for him, a clear breach of shared values.

Despite widespread awareness that social media obscures more than it reveals, it remains central to shaping transnational relationships. Fesenmyer (2023) highlights imagination as key to such dynamics, noting that migrants are simultaneously imagined as both 'wildly successful' and as 'having forgotten those back home', while kin are viewed as both 'deeply missed sources of comfort' and parallelly, as 'cunning or greedy'. Carling's (2002) ethnography explores the trope of 'partying' – a symbol of frivolous spending in relatives' narratives, often used to explain unmet remittance expectations and confirms that when tension dominates transnational ties, migrants may shift their focus towards the host society. Nonetheless, while criticising others for prioritising pleasure, Claudio's story reflected a change in his own values: *"What bothers me is that I make an effort – me or anyone else – and I have to get up at five in the morning to go to work, to do overtime. Just last weekend, I worked 12 hours on Saturday and two hours on Sunday to earn some extra money, so I could count on that to travel or something else […] and then someone calls me. […] Maybe I am an egoist, but it does not seem just to me."*

While recent experience of the crisis in Venezuela often served as a strong drive to provide help, this tended to wane over time, as the everyday demands of life increasingly consumed migrants' time, energy, and resources. I remember meeting Paola and Alberto, newly arrived in the UK after a tedious 'extraction' process initiated by their sons. In their precarious situation, sharing a house with half a dozen people of various nationalities, they renounced small luxuries like a coffee out. However, when the conversation turned to remittances, they told me they could not resist sending money to former colleagues, neighbours, or village friends who faced hardship, often sacrificing their last pennies to do so. New arrivals often recounted that, although

selling the homes and furniture they had worked for their entire lives for a fraction of their value was amongst the most painful experiences they had had to endure, they found consolation in the thought that they were helping fellow Venezuelans in desperate need. Yet, as the migration experience dragged on, such sentiments shifted, with the same beneficiaries beginning to be described as 'parasites' eager to seize their benefactors' valuable possessions.

This shift was partially rooted in the 'ethos of return' becoming uncertain. Una Okonkwo Osili (2004) and Christian Dustmann and Josep Mestres (2010) demonstrate that migrants who view their stay as temporary tend to remit more frequently, often going to great lengths to maintain strong ties with their community of origin, viewing migration as a temporary sacrifice for a collective future. The majority of my Venezuelan participants arrived in the UK with the plan to 'wait out the crisis' but with Venezuela seen as resistant to change, the prospect of return faded, and migration increasingly became framed as a definitive break from the past.

Another factor that humanitarian literature refers to as 'compassion fatigue', a response to "on-going demands of being compassionate in helping those who are suffering" (Downs, 2013 in IOM Staff Health and Welfare, 2025, p. 1) also became visible, preventing people from being invested in their lives abroad. My Venezuelan participants told me it was painful to live in the past and described feeling overwhelmed by growing pressure and guilt over their inability to comply. This, in turn, often led them to distance themselves from these obligations, as Romina's account illustrates: *"it is an immense pain. Imagine, I've been avoiding contact, because everyone is asking for help. I can't help so many people. I don't work, and they all want you to help them somehow. The*

need is just too great, too great. I've withdrawn a bit in that sense. Because if I keep contact like before, then I'd have to help them. […] It pains me deeply to do it, but I have to."

The resulting shift toward more intimate circles was widespread. I remember my surprise when the director of VeneHelp confidently stated that Venezuelan diaspora organisations had plateaued: I had assumed they would flourish once migrants felt settled and financially secure. She argued that the memory of urgency mattered more than the ability to give. VeneHelp itself had begun to strategically narrow its scope. Alejandra admitted that, in the beginning, they were 'firefighting', trying to meet as many immediate demands as possible – an approach she knew would eventually lead to burnout and the organisation's collapse. While keeping some large-scale initiatives, they adopted a member's suggestion to focus on his home village and provide meals to children there, an effort more manageable for the small team. VeneHelp welcomed the assistance the member's family could provide locally and in aiding the community, they also addressed supporters' waning enthusiasm over helping 'strangers' – people they felt no personal connection to. The current model allows VeneHelp members to visit the village during trips home and build relationships, gradually reincorporating Venezuelans living in Venezuela into the imagined nation the diaspora has constructed abroad.

The role of kin in Venezuelan diaspora action

I first met Inés at the Venezuelan Consulate, and she immediately intrigued me. Hosting her own event, a film screening titled 'Four Films to Change the World', she radiated

the confidence of someone who makes you believe that a better future is possible. Though this was our first in-person encounter, I already knew of her as her name was practically synonymous with Chavism in London. Inés was affiliated with Patria Bolivariana, an organisation whose mission was to inform the British public about Chávez's social and political reforms; oppose Western intervention, such as the Bank of England's withholding of Venezuelan gold; and challenge portrayals of Maduro as a threat to democracy. Members worked to support the socialist narrative by protesting Juan Guaidó's visit to the UK, publishing amendments to British media reports, and organising regular street demonstrations. As Inés recalled: *"We made big banners, and we did rallies in Trafalgar Square. We did some street theatre: somebody dressed with Trump's face, others with a Venezuela-for-glory dress, holding a barrel with oil running from it. We were trying to educate people and trying to get the narrative over of what was really happening."*

Whenever the Chavista scene in London was mentioned, my Venezuelan participants would become enraged. They argued that since migration was a sign of dissent, Chavistas' move did not make sense: given that the socialist regime had caused the crisis that forced millions to flee, Chavistas' presence felt like an insult to them. Various myths circulated about potential motives: some believed Chavistas hoarded wealth in the UK by avoiding sanctions, while others suspected them of spying for the regime. While I remained neutral to speculations, I always thought of Inés as someone committed to Chavism her entire life. This impression solidified through frequent encounters, each marked by her efforts to educate me about the achievements of 21st century socialism.

Eager to learn more, I asked Inés for an interview. In it, to my surprise, she admitted that despite briefly joining a socialist group as a student – as it was trendy at the time – she did not become politically engaged until 2015. *"My family and my kids saw a new aspect of me; they really found it unusual because I never really talked about politics before. […] But as I have said, it has just been a very interesting journey for me, you know, to discover this side of me."* Her turn to activism was sparked by what she perceived as the smearing of Venezuela's name by Western powers. At the time, she was working for a news TV, translating documentaries from Spanish to English, but soon, assignments abruptly stopped, which she attributed to the impact of sanctions. "*Look, it was such an intense propaganda. […] So I think it was very organic that I would join those groups because I felt strongly that there was a propaganda machine going on against Venezuela."*

However, there was another dimension to Inés's engagement that I had initially overlooked. She mentioned it briefly during our interview, but its significance only became clear when I watched her first documentary. I had not expected a film so openly supportive of the regime to start on such a personal note: *"I always wanted to make a documentary about Venezuela, but I never imagined that in it, I would talk about the death of my younger sister."* In 2018, Inés's sister tragically died of malaria. A disease curable with prompt medical attention, her death was ultimately caused by her inability to access adequate healthcare. While medical shortages have been linked to Maduro's regime (e.g., Bittleston, 2020), Inés interpreted her sister's death as a consequence of US sanctions. As she explains in the film, her sister *"was a Chavista until her very last day"*, and thus, blaming the government would have felt like an insult to her memory. Before her death, she also left Inés a letter describing the many improvements socialism

had brought to Venezuela while Inés lived abroad, which became the film's central motif. In her grief, Inés's search for justice found expression in political action: like many other Venezuelans, her diaspora efforts aimed to undo the injury inflicted by the ongoing crisis – only, unlike others, she located the blame in 'the West'.

In Inés's activism, the personal and political became intimately intertwined, with much of her diaspora action unfolding in direct or indirect support of her family. The monthly leftist film screenings she organised did not only foster political support but also raised funds for the agrarian collective her father belonged to, which the sanctions had severely affected. Furthermore, a fund she established served to honour her sister's memory. Inés believed that by campaigning for Maduro's rule free from Western interference, she could protect those she loved most. Listening to her story allowed me to catch a glimpse of a devoted daughter and sister behind the façade of the fervent Chavista. I saw a woman who understood that, despite the harshest of hardships, her parents would never agree to move to the UK as that would mean parting with the soil that nurtured their beloved mango tree as well as the ideology that nurtured their hope for an egalitarian future for all. I suddenly understood that Inés shared a lot more with my other participants than anyone would dare admit.

While preparing a Venezuelan dish, Carmen suddenly announced that if I wanted to write about something truly Venezuelan, I had to write about the bond Venezuelans shared with their mothers. Introducing the topic by disclosing that her ex-husband had left her for his mother, the spirited woman, who wore more hats in the Venezuelan community than one could count, explained that she only realised how unnatural the mother-child bond was after moving to the UK: *"Can you believe that my mother was*

washing my panties until I moved here? Such patterns are really unhealthy and make people dependent and pose an obstacle to having an independent life." Still, she concluded, her relationship with her mother was closer than ever: they spoke several times daily, with her mum scolding her if she did not answer the phone because she was busy.

One could say that Carmen lived a typical migrant life, working hard to establish herself even after 8 years. She spent her days working at an NGO and her nights caring for a frail 99-year-old lady in order to provide financial safety for herself and her parents in Venezuela. At the same time, she was studying for an English exam and planning her wedding with a Colombian migrant. When she messaged me, it was always via voice notes, with the steady hum of the London tube in the background as she rushed from one commitment to the other. Despite her non-existent free time, Carmen was a key figure of both VeneHelp and Doradas, a group supporting elderly Venezuelans struggling to adapt to life in London. *"Just imagine, some of them had never been outside of Venezuela before, don't speak English, and become very isolated as the family they have in the UK often work in multiple jobs to make ends meet."* – she explained. Several times during my fieldwork, she considered stepping down due to overwhelm, but each time she persisted and even after sleepless nights, would unfailingly turn up for gatherings. When I asked what kept her going, Carmen said the ladies reminded her of her mother and helping them felt like she was doing something for her.

Family was central to Venezuelans' migration projects. Several informants explained that, especially amongst the impoverished, the extended family would come together to

select the most capable member to migrate, pooling resources for the journey in return for future remittances. This mirrors patterns in other groups. As Hein de Haas, Tineke Fokkema and Mohamed Fassi Fihri (2015) note regarding Mexicans, households choose the strongest candidates to boost family income, with remittances framed as the repayment of debt. Migration and remittances were thus mechanisms to strengthen family resilience in the face of adversity (Fesenmyer, 2023). Another perspective views migration as risk mitigation. While industrialised countries manage risk through institutional mechanisms like insurance and social protections, families in low-income countries often lack such safety nets, leaving families vulnerable to instability. Migration, therefore, functions as a strategy to collectively manage and diversify risk (Garip, 2016).

Remittance sending became so embedded in transnational life that an individual's well-being was often seen as a reflection on the quality of their kin relations. Carmen expressed frustration over those still in Venezuela often exploiting the goodwill of emigrants by asking for money. She recalled an incident where an acquaintance from her hometown launched a crowdfunding campaign, claiming she had been in a car accident and, as a single mother, urgently needed help. The woman asked Carmen to donate and share her campaign in the UK, but Carmen quickly realised it was a scam, with the photo of the wrecked car being a stock image, and decided to ignore it. However, her mother in Venezuela contributed, increasing Carmen's remittance burden as the generous act left her without money. Carmen's bitter remark *"It's not my problem that nobody in her family loves her enough to migrate so they can send her money!"* captured the underlying belief.

Existing family ties in the destination country were used strategically as success abroad often depended on the support of emigrant relatives. Family reunification visas became a lifeline in post-Brexit Britain's increasingly restrictive climate. I also encountered cases where Venezuelans in the UK formally employed relatives as household helpers to secure residency permits for them. The inextricability of migrants and their families in Venezuela was also reflected by what Fesenmyer (2023) calls "intentional actions" (p. 91) – choices shaped by the belief that a migrant's behaviour directly affects loved ones back home. Many of my informants constantly weighed their everyday choices in light of their impact on relatives. Beyond sending remittances and saving for his mother's repatriation, Rafael carefully curated his online presence, knowing that something as simple as a photo with a nice car could prompt his father being kidnapped. He also predicted that people's openness to my interviews would depend on whether they still had close relatives in Venezuela. Meanwhile, Romina, who previously praised diaspora structures, confessed her inability to enjoy events involving spending: *"For me, maybe 20 dollars is nothing. Here. But for them, it's a lot. For them, it could mean food for four or five days. So I don't... When it comes to Doradas, I don't attend often. Because honestly, they really like going out. Running up big bills. I can afford it. But I can't allow myself the luxury while I have two brothers who need me."*

Most importantly, a phenomenon I term 'extraction' emerged as a central motivation amongst Venezuelan migrants. Extraction refers to organising the emigration of close family members to join oneself or relatives abroad, often co-financing pertinent costs with them. This process typically involved parents: while children often accompanied migrants, older relatives were initially left behind, waiting to be relocated at a late stage. Without intending to reference 'extractivism', I chose the term 'extraction' to reflect

removal and separation, often as a forceful and reluctant process, based on Venezuelans' description of it. Unlike Hungarians, who would say 'át/kihozni Angliába' [bring someone over to England], with an emphasis on the destination, Venezuelans spoke of 'sacar de Venezuela' [take out of Venezuela], focusing on the removal itself. The destination seemed secondary to the act of separation, reducing loved ones to bodies that could freely be moved around the map. Aware of Brexit-related restrictions, many considered bringing family as far as Spain or other European countries, or, amongst less privileged families, even just across the Colombian border, as having fulfilled the mission.

The overwhelming importance of removing one's close kin from Venezuela regulated many aspects of emigrants' lives. When prompted, everyone would clearly recite the order in which they planned to extract relatives, the funds needed for each step, and the key helpers facilitating the process. In Chapter 7, I show how the prospect of extracting his mother played a major role in Rafael's willingness to forgive his abusive employers. The all-consuming nature of extraction also became evident when I called one Venezuelan colleague's attention to another's romantic interest in a girl, but she dismissed me saying it is only a fling since he is unable to commit to a relationship with his mother's extraction pending. It seemed like life stood still and lost much of its inherent meaning while one was preparing extraction.

What Carmen and Inés had in common was their families' refusal to be extracted, with the unfulfilled duty of securing kin's safety cementing them in diaspora activism. As remittances felt like drops in the ocean, both women felt compelled to address broader systemic issues: Inés by campaigning for a Chavista regime free from Western

intervention, and Carmen by delivering humanitarian aid through VeneHelp. The reverse was also true: once extraction was accomplished, motivation for diaspora activism often dissipated. Yessica, the site manager at Arepana, left Venezuela at 18, piggybacking on her sister. She often spoke of her dream to become a tattoo artist – an ambition constantly under attack at her Catholic high school. Despite being proud of her cosmopolitan mindset and critical of many aspects of Venezuela, her 'venezolanidad' remained a key guiding principle of her life. Having worked for the arepa business since her arrival, she cherished her role at the heart of the market's Venezuelan hub and indeed, amid frequent staff turnover, Yessica became my steady anchor in the community. She loved sharing screenshots of herself featured in the campaign of VeNidito, a London-based group providing nourishment to Venezuelan children and when I joined the company, she was also developing a campaign for World Arepa Day, an initiative she celebrated for helping compatriots preserve their identity abroad.

Nonetheless, one day, Yessica took an extended holiday. She and her sister, along with their uncles, had finally organised the 'extraction' of her mother and younger brother, whom she had not seen in four years. They were moving them to Spain, and she flew out to help them settle. The weeks leading up to her trip were filled with anxious anticipation. *"She always says everything is OK."* – Yessica told me, *"But who knows? They always say that, right?"*. Apart from her grandparents, this 'extraction' will have marked her entire family's departure from Venezuela – they were scattered across the globe, but safely out.

Upon her return to London, however, Yessica quit her job at Arepana and took on work as a tattoo shop receptionist. At our last meeting, she told me, *"I really don't*

understand what kept me in this whole 'I love Venezuela' thing for so long, I was never that kind of person to start with." Her words reminded me of a remark she had once made about her boyfriend's tattoo, a world map he gradually coloured in with each country he visited: she found the practice ridiculous, as she did not believe in nation states. With that, she disappeared from our lives forever, doing justice to her earlier statement that Venezuelans also dreamt of acting on their individualism, but could not do so while they still had relatives in Venezuela.

The above episodes made me interested in how the private and public aspects of homewards orientation – or, as Paul Tabar calls them, the 'transnational' and 'diaspora' field – interact. 'Transnational field' refers to private spheres of engagement, which Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron (2001) define as "an unbounded terrain of interlocking egocentric networks that extends across the borders of two or more nation-states and that incorporates its participants in the day-to-day activities of social reproduction in these various locations" (p. 544). As Miranda Lubbers, Ashton Verdery and José Luis Molina (2020) suggest, a focus on transnational social fields, which defines space in social rather than geographical terms, provides a framework for understanding transnationality as embedded in social relationships.

In turn, Appe and Papyan (2024) talk about diaspora action as the "transfer of resources such as money, time, labor, and knowledge to countries of origin for the public good" (p. 1). According to Tabar (2019),

> the public character of diasporic activities, being aimed at the state or being community-based, sets them apart from transnational activities. […] If a member of the diaspora engages in dialogue with a family member in the homeland about personal finances or private relationships, for example, he/she is engaging in transnational relations, but his/her actions are not diasporic, because they are not aimed at or related to the homeland itself despite taking place in the homeland. (p. 462)

While Tabar argues that the two spheres must be separated as 'the rules of the game are different', I contend that the transnational and diaspora fields intersect, converge, and mutually reinforce each other and hence, must be understood in their intertwined complexity.

I pose the question whether the diaspora field can exist without the transnational field and if there can be engagement with the nation without investment in personal relationships that unfold within its realms. Robin Cohen starts his book 'Global Diasporas' (2008) with the statement "The assumption that minorities and migrants will demonstrate an exclusive loyalty to the nation-state is now questionable. Scholars of nationalism, international migration and ethnic relations need new conceptual maps and fresh case studies to understand the growth of complex transnational identities." (viii) and in his article 'Diasporas and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers' (1996), deconstructs the idea that loyalty expressed through diaspora action is to the state: "Unlike adherence to ethnicity, religion or diaspora, the nation-state is often too large and too amorphous an entity to be the object of intimate affection." (pp. 517-8). He echoes migration scholars (e.g. Guarnizo, 1997; Vertovec, 1999; Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) who have long questioned the taken-for-grantedness of 'methodological nationalism', the assumption that the nation-state is the container for social processes and thus, the sole unit of analysis.

In order to understand how the transnational and diaspora fields interact, I revisit Nicholas Van Hear and Robin Cohen's (2017) framework on the spheres of diaspora action to contrast its constituents with the dynamics emerging in my field. Although their model emerged from the reality of conflict societies, I argue that it can be

expanded to understand diaspora activity in other contexts. Van Hear and Cohen define the purpose behind their model in the following words: "By disaggregating 'diaspora engagement' we tease out different orders of connection and disconnection between the diaspora and those at home. In particular, we reveal the conditions and circumstances that can generate common ground as well as rendering them at odds with one another." (p. 1). Featuring different degrees of interplay between the private and the public, they separate the spheres of the household/extended family; the known community; and the imagined community.

To accommodate my findings, I propose distinguishing between the sphere of motivation and the sphere of action. As Van Hear and Cohen note, "there are also tensions among the different spheres – diaspora members may find themselves pulled between obligations to their own family in the host country, to their own community in the host country, to those in the wider diaspora, to those left in the conflict-ridden homeland, and to the wider political struggle in the homeland" (p. 7). As illustrated above, it is difficult to assign significance to any single category as determinant alone: while diaspora action was often directed at larger collectives – most commonly the 'imagined community' of compatriots – motivation typically did not originate there. Instead, it emerged in relation to the people migrants cared for, who were also beneficiaries of diaspora action to some extent. As shown in Table 3, I understand my informants' principal sphere of motivation to be the 'household/extended family', and the target of their action as the 'imagined national community'. Separating these spheres helps clarify why Inés, Carmen, and Yessica remained invested in causes seemingly distant from their immediate realities – and why, in Yessica's case, investment faded once her relatives had been successfully extracted.

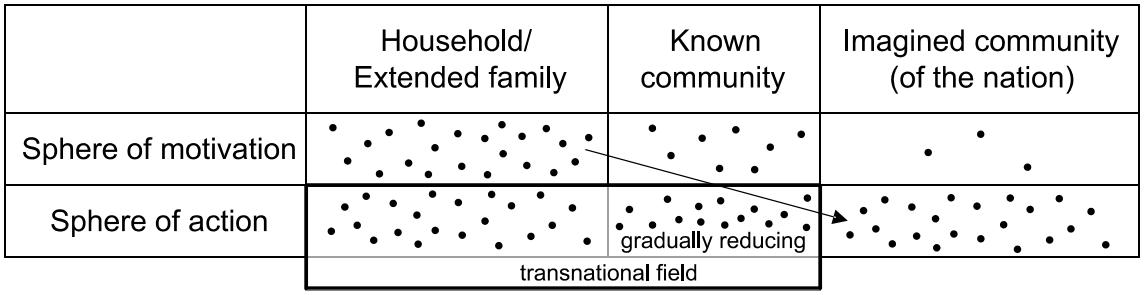


Table 3. Visual representation of diaspora action amongst Venezuelans – based on the extended version of Van Hear and Cohen's (2017) framework.

Descendant-oriented diaspora action amongst Hungarians

I met Evelin, the Hungarian economist in her late twenties, at the Embassy's commemoration of the revolution of 1848. Being the only young people present, we bonded quickly. However, while I was attending out of fieldwork obligations, Evelin's enthusiasm was palpable. Despite having lived in London for eight years, she was new to the diaspora scene and eager to engage, asking me to share details of upcoming events. As she explained, like many Hungarians, she initially chose to distance herself from her national identity, but a recent 'enlightenment' had transformed her outlook. She now actively sought to reconnect with her culture and foster solidarity among compatriots, for example by convincing her boss to hold the company Christmas at a Hungarian restaurant:

> *I felt like if it's ten people, especially since the majority of my colleagues are British, who drink a lot and pour a lot of money into alcohol, then it is better if this money goes into the cash register of a local Hungarian restaurant. I felt a bond despite not knowing the owner of the restaurant. This invisible tie was there inside of me and for my colleagues, it's all the same, just beer, but for me, it was a good feeling that I am supporting local Hungarian workers.*

Evelin came to London after secondary school to pursue higher education, a move subsidised by her family: *"I don't come from a rich family, but when it comes to studying, that's the one thing that my parents support. For me, [it was] a burden using the savings of my family to be able to be here."* While Evelin described a degree of indebtedness to her parents, the flow of resources did not become reciprocal once she had successfully established herself in the UK. Frances Pine's (2014) study of post-EU accession Polish migrants describes a historical shift in kinship obligations. She explains that "I was told by several grandparents that in the past they would have helped

to pay for a flat, house materials, or a wedding; a plane ticket to the United Kingdom or English language lessons are the contemporary equivalents. The young people were not expected to send back remittances to the senior generations, at least not those in the city. […] While they bring back individual presents, they only rarely hand over their earnings either as regular remittances or when returning." (p. 102).

I observed similar dynamics amongst my Hungarian participants. While life in the UK was generally viewed positively and migrants predominantly attested to being satisfied, especially relative to the declining conditions in Hungary under Fidesz, perceptions of migrants as needy and of family members as financially stable became entrenched. This may reflect the reality of family members typically owning property in Hungary and Hungarian migrants mostly only being able to rent in London, which rendered them more vulnerable. Instead of monetary help, obligations were fulfilled through frequent visits home and facilitating the family's visit – but not move – to the UK. Evelin suggested that exposing relatives to 'British mentality' was the most valuable contribution she could give as it had the potential of planting seeds of change in Hungary. As such, much of what Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff (2012) conceptualises as 'diaspora contributions' were predominantly directed toward the local Hungarian community.

Carling (2002) describes a process of "de-transnationalization" (p. 14) among Cape Verdean migrants, characterised by retreat from transnational practices to reorient social, economic, and emotional investments towards more individualised, localised life strategies. Such a movement challenges earlier paradigms that emphasised transnationalism as a defining feature of contemporary migration. Building on Carling's

concept, I propose that Hungarian migrants – mirroring broader patterns of intra-EU mobility – are entering what might be called a ‘post-transnationalist phase’, in which the home country ceases to be the central axis of migrant action. This is not to say that the homeland becomes forgotten; as parents predominantly stay in Hungary, they are a permanent connection to the country. Rather, it functions more as a symbolic or affective reference point, while concrete resources are invested locally.

Schnapper’s (1999) distinction between symbolic loyalties and loyalties enacted through everyday practices is useful here: as he contends, migrants may retain identification with their homeland while prioritising investment in other domains. I argue that Hungarian migrants fail to translate sentiments towards family and homeland into significant resource commitments. While this is partially rooted in the lack of moral pressure from relatives, who often reject offers, it also reflects the logic of ‘ideological citizenship’, whereby localised activities are encouraged to strengthen the national community’s cohesion and continuity abroad. Within this framework, diaspora is reconfigured as a sphere of national belonging situated inside the host country, which reproduces the idea of the nation, challenging Tabar’s (2019) assertion that the diaspora field necessarily entails a transnational field.

This brings us to the ‘enlightenment’ Evelin experienced, whose reason she herself struggled to explain. Evelin told me that during her studies, she never made a firm commitment to the UK. However, entering a relationship with a Romanian partner, a lot of her thinking started to revolve around the prospect of raising culturally mixed children in a country that was home to neither parent. This anticipated future made her understand that her Hungarian roots were central to her worldview, sense of self and

daily practices – something she now felt a responsibility to pass on to the next generation. Amongst Hungarian migrants, a common pattern was initial detachment from the Hungarian community, followed by engagement catalysed by parenthood, motivated by the cultural learning this would entail for the offspring. While individuals often embraced a cosmopolitan existence upon migration, the prospect of raising children 'culture-less' or fluent only in the host society's cultural idiom provoked a sense of loss and anxiety.

Even Hungarians openly critical of Hungary's nationalist regime expressed deep pride in the Hungarian language and the country's intellectual legacy, with the number of Hungarian Nobel prize winners being a constant point of reference, which my participants attributed to Hungarians speaking a 'difficult' language. Most of my participants continued to valorise Hungarian education, and some wanted to retain the option of enrolling their children in it. Such sentiments persisted despite the Hungarian education system undergoing crisis, with mass dismissals of teachers participating in pro-democracy protests leaving top schools understaffed. Keeping the option of return open, normally envisioned to coincide with the start of primary school, remained a key factor influencing Hungarian families' plans in the UK.

Balázs used a phrase by István Széchenyi, a central figure of the Hungarian Reform Era when reflecting on diaspora subjectivity: 'A nemzet a nyelvében él.' [A nation lives in its language]. Széchenyi uttered the sentence when donating his estate's yearly income to found the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1825 as part of a broader project of linguistic and cultural nation-building. Echoing this legacy, Balázs reflected on the pragmatic dimensions of language in the diaspora: *"I don't have a child, so it is all very*

theoretical. But if I had one and I decided to move back home at any point, I would want language not to be an obstacle." In his statement, the Hungarian language was framed as both an expression of value-based identity and a prerequisite for future mobility.

Kodály Zoltán, composer and ethnomusicologist, was another important figure of cultural preservation. His famous assertion from 1964, "Culture cannot be inherited. The culture of our predecessors quickly evaporates unless each generation acquires it for itself anew." was widely cited in nationalist narratives, framing culture as something learnt and cultivated through labour. Unlike my Venezuelan participants, who viewed cultural transmission as effortlessly accompanying sociality, Hungarian migrants often approached it as requiring deliberate and structured effort. Their framing also posited culture as the monopoly of the state. While many migrants rejected the state's domestic politics, they nonetheless mostly accepted its authority to disseminate 'authentic' national culture.

The most successful Hungarian diaspora initiatives were those that focused on children's cultural learning but also served as entry points for broader family participation. One of the most surreal events I attended during my fieldwork was a 'patriotic poem recital competition', whereby ten-year-olds uttered lines dense with nationalist vocabulary. I wondered if these bilingual kids understood the ideological weight of their script. Yet, parents proudly cheered them on, internalising the meanings performed on stage. Such performances functioned as symbolic acts forging diasporic allegiance, reinforcing belonging not through transnational practice, but through the circulation of nationalist affect. Still, this dynamic was not finite, with children's

receptiveness shaping adult participation. For instance, when I invited Barbara for an interview, she made an apologetic disclaimer that her diaspora involvement had faded in recent years: while her firstborn daughter enthusiastically embraced the Hungary weekend school, her son never really warmed up to it.

As András Kováts and Attila Papp Z. (2016) observe, Hungarian migrants often "venture out from the ethnic 'niche'" (p. 120). While the resulting independence supports economic success, it leads to weakening social ties and dissatisfaction with community life, which has been a commonly quoted reason for return during my research. Through state-affiliated diaspora organisations, the state filled the void left by alie(n)ation. It has positioned itself as a provider of belonging, offering parents the assurance that their (prospective) descendants can access the idealised 'national unity' if they invest in state-mediated cultural education. As such, their success lies precisely in filling the affective gap left by the ambivalence felt by migrants towards national solidarity upon their arrival.

Such processes were largely aided by Brexit: London was initially experienced as transient by many, but the transition filtered out those not committed to staying long-term. In Brexit's aftermath, my participants felt a new readiness to strengthen local Hungarian communities, an aim that coincided with the priorities of Hungary. At the same time, from the perspective of the homeland, the formation of strong Hungarian communities contributed, if inadvertently, to the state's broader nation-building project.

Despite the disconnect between Hungarian diaspora activity and families back home, I found that the temporary relocation of parents to the UK often boosted diaspora participation. I met Tímea at a St Stephen's Day celebration at Pannónika and when she

learned that I was struggling to secure accommodation, she invited me to spend a couple of days with her and her sons on the outskirts of London. As my arrival fell on a Sunday, she insisted on showing me the countryside where she would take the boys berry-picking. Sitting in her car, I thanked her for her hospitality again. Without taking her eyes off the road, she remarked that I had timed my visit well as her mother was arriving soon for a six-month stay. I smiled and, more out of politeness than curiosity, asked whether her mother liked being in London, not anticipating her honest response: *"No, she actually hates it. She only comes because heating costs in Hungary are getting out of control."*

Originally from Transylvania, Tímea lived half of her life in Hungary with her mother. Falling in love with an Egyptian man while on holiday, they chose the UK as the place to unite their lives due to visa considerations. However, after their baby was born, the relationship deteriorated, and Tímea resolved to return to Budapest with her child to have her mother close for support. A bitter legal battle ensued, with Tímea selling her Budapest home, where her mother lived, and borrowing money from her to fund the appeal. Yet, the court ruled in favour of the father, obliging her to stay in the UK to honour his visitation rights. The process left both women impoverished and forced Tímea to spend some time in a homeless shelter for mothers. She now lives in council housing with her two sons, the younger born from a subsequent relationship.

Tímea often complained that when she spoke to the boys in Hungarian, they consistently replied in English. She confessed that her priorities shifted after her return to Hungary was prevented: no longer seeing the country as part of their future, she prioritised IT classes over the Hungarian weekend school. However, she insisted that

her mother's upcoming visit would change language dynamics. Communication with grandparents was often highlighted as a reason to revive the use of Hungarian and Tímea's family was no exception. Moreover, since Tímea's mother neither spoke English, nor felt any affinity towards British culture, her visit would also increase their participation in Pannónika's events.

Consequently, Tímea's mother became a catalyst for diaspora participation – in stark contrast with what I documented amongst Venezuelans. Maurizio was the first Venezuelan I interviewed because I was intrigued by his Christmas initiative: he prepared and delivered hallacas to Venezuelan families experiencing financial difficulties in London so they could enjoy a proper Venezuelan Christmas meal. During our interview, he shared heart-warming stories of recipients crying with joy and invited me to join him in December. In October, he still organised a large-scale fundraiser, but after his mother's arrival around Halloween, I began seeing him less frequently. As Christmas approached, I kept asking for updates, but it soon became clear that after half a decade of success, the initiative would now be cancelled. I did not see Maurizio again until VeneHelp's summer party in June, by which time his mother had returned to Venezuela.

Building on my extended version of Van Hear and Cohen's spheres of diaspora engagement framework, I propose two additional vertical layers emerging from my insights gained in the Hungarian community: the layer of (prospective) descendants and of the local community of co-nationals. I argued that Venezuelan participants were clearly embeddedness in transnational networks, keeping them invested. In the Hungarian case, diasporic subjectivity often only surfaced when informants began to

consider having children. Marketing experts had seemingly beaten me to the recognition of such patterns though as the difference was clearly reflected in Facebook ads targeting the two communities: while Venezuelans were encouraged to send remittances or buy insurance for their parents, Hungarians kept being prompted to send their kids to Hungarian school.

As such, the two communities were marked by diverging temporal orientations: for Venezuelans, diaspora activity was typically geared towards the past while Hungarians' diaspora activity was future-focused. Both groups demonstrated forms of personhood constituted through kin networks – yet they emphasised family and community at different points in their lives. As I show in Table 4, Hungarian migrants predominantly embraced diaspora subjectivity in relation to motherhood, which triggered engagement with the local community and allowed the state to further extend it in support of an imagined national community on an ideological level. I thus argue that unlike the Venezuelan case, where activism often diminishes over time, Hungarian diaspora participation, once sparked by plans to start a family, may prove more enduring, as it reorients migrants towards an idealised collective future.

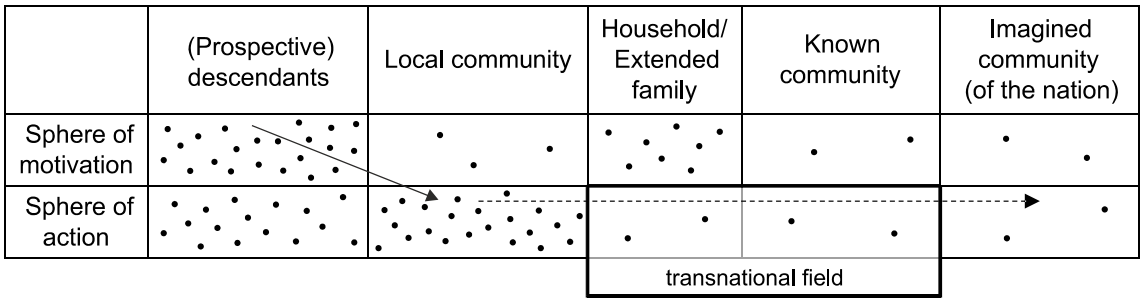


Table 4. Visual representation of diaspora action amongst Hungarians – based on the extended version of Van Hear and Cohen's (2017) framework.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the interplay between migrants, kin, and community, aiming to understand what it reveals about diaspora participation. Moving beyond methodological nationalism and adopting an analytical framework of personhood, I argued that while diaspora activity may be directed at the nation, it is rarely motivated by it and suggested that diaspora subjectivities are often shaped by ontological concerns instead. I focused on social networks that become (re)activated through migration, not simply as mechanisms of support, but as sites where identities and obligations are negotiated, and illustrated that diasporic practices were mobilised to enact and affirm who migrants are as persons.

The affective effort to revive Venezuelanness abroad in contestation of the state's perceived goal to weaken ties was underscored, even if I argued that many migrants eventually distanced themselves from Venezuela-based social networks over ever-growing demands for support. I contended that kin-based involvement both became the main catalyst of diaspora action and produced what I called the logic of 'extraction'. My concept captures the overwhelming priority allocated to removing kin from Venezuela and as such, highlights a temporal orientation towards the past that often triggers homewards political or humanitarian activity.

Hungarian migrants' personhood, in contrast, was often shaped by what I called 'alie(n)ation', an orientation towards individualism, assessed against the backdrop of nationalist narratives of national unity. The resulting disillusionment and initial disengagement gave way to renewed interest in diaspora participation at the time of parenthood, when the transmission of cultural identity was reframed as a personal

responsibility accessible only through the state, highlighting the future-orientedness of Hungarian diaspora processes. The contrast also enabled me to introduce the notion of the ‘post-transnational diaspora’: a form of engagement predominantly not directed at the origin country in practical terms, but legible through the logic of ‘ideological citizenship’, coinciding with demands inherent to nationalist narratives.

Ultimately, this chapter has shown that diaspora activity has less to do with the nation than with the ongoing construction of personhood across borders. This recognition shifts our understanding of migrants as mere subjects of national projects towards that of individuals embedded in moral worlds, who, shaped by relationality, navigate complex, transnational lives by mobilising resources in the context of the nation.

Chapter 5 – Political ideologies in migration

Introduction

> *I wanted to go to one last demonstration of the opposition with my mum and there I talked to the mayor and I told him, look, I am going abroad for a year and I am going to return because I would like to make a lot of contacts there so that I can understand how Europe is functioning better than Latin America. Because there are so many programmes that can be replicated. And it was in the middle of so much euphoria and so many excited cries that he said, we will be in touch – I will be waiting for you so we can keep building the country.*

This is how Carmen described her goal attached to migration. Taking the opportunity to study English abroad, she planned to return with progressive ideas to help improve Venezuela's future. However, her path took an unexpected turn after she married a fellow Venezuelan in London, which turned her priorities towards joining protests locally to denounce Venezuela's socialist government. Nonetheless, by the time I met her, she was part of VeneHelp, a humanitarian organisation, which, despite largely being composed of former protesters, requires its members to adhere to a strictly apolitical ethos.

In academic literature, it is widely recognised that political ideologies circulate with the movement of people. Previous studies on migrants' political impact focus on three ways this happens. Firstly, through migrants bringing host-state ideologies back with them when they return (e.g. Dzięglewski, 2013; Chauvet and Mercier, 2014; Bobova, 2016). Secondly, through migrants supporting political parties at home via 'political remittances' like voting, lobbying or sending money back or contesting political processes (e.g. Horst, 2008; Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, 2010; Córdova and Hiskey, 2015; Lacroix, Levitt and Vari-Lavoisier, 2016; Duquette-Rury, Waldinger, and Lim,

2018; Escribà-Folch, Meseguer and Wright, 2018). Thirdly, through migrants influencing host state politics with ideologies from the home country (e.g. Peró, 2011; Wals, 2013; Auer and Schaub, 2024), often through forging 'ideological citizenship'. Most of this literature portrays migrants as carriers of political ideologies. However, my research reveals more nuanced, ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory tendencies. As illustrated in Chapter 2, migrants may aspire to a capitalist dream but simultaneously enact practices rooted in socialism. Similarly, migrants may reject a particular political ideology in their home country yet align with it abroad. Others may opt for apoliticism – a decision that, I argue, can itself constitute a powerful political stance.

Previously, I underlined the tension that emerges from migrants contesting home-states regimes through migration and home states approaching them through the principles of 'ideological citizenship'. In this chapter, I explore what kinds of political subjectivities this triggers on the ground. I show that political ideologies are neither static nor uniformly internalised; rather, they are fluid and subject to reinterpretation as migrants (re-)encounter them within the context of the host state. Therefore, I contend that migrants' political ideologies should be understood not merely as extensions of party discourse, but as cultural expressions of belonging and resistance, shaped through everyday practices of living in transnational spaces.

Sune Haugbolle (2018) argues that ideology is a fundamental aspect of how humans make sense of the world around them. Identifying with a political party is an important heuristic, which provides individuals with a cognitive shortcut to interpret key issues of the political landscape (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001). These frameworks are rarely fully seamless or rational, but they are deeply human tools for navigating complexity and

envisioning possibility. Nonetheless, the limitations of reductive alliance-building strategies come to the fore when ideologies are placed into a different context.

Migrants navigate lives relying on the ideological debris of past experience and the imagination sparked by the promise of more favourable landscapes for themselves and their communities. As Michael Freeden (2015) argues, political thought is invoked when people engage in everyday acts of decision-making, justify or challenge authority, navigate conflicting moral or emotional demands, and seek validation for the identities they inhabit and the actions they take. According to Haugbolle (2018), political thinking is "dynamic and contextual, reacting to history as it unfolds, and ideologies change over time. Ideology is emotional and fluid. But it still betrays patterns, and those patterns are what political anthropologists should seek to understand" (p. 195). My goal in this chapter is to explore how migrants read history as it unfolds, how particular interpretations become paradigmatic, and how 'popular' philosophy aligns with the solutions thinkers propose – or put simply, how 'grand schemes' are constructed through everyday experiences.

I begin the chapter by highlighting the manifold ways my Venezuelan participants' understanding of socialism conflicted with UK-based conceptualisations of socialist ideology, prompting Venezuelans to reevaluate their own relationship to it – while keeping in mind that there are historical varieties to socialism. I illustrate that those who had lived through socialism tended to view it more negatively than those who had not, with the latter group treating it as an abstract ideal, whereas the former recalled its lived contradictions. I also highlight that the strongest supporters of home-state politics in both groups were those who had never lived through their home state's current regime,

and had only encountered nationalism and socialism, respectively, through ideology, at a distance, frequently as a promise shaped by the British context.

In the second section, I further explore the tension between ideology as a philosophical construct and its lived implementation. I argue that Hungarians were haunted by nationalism more than socialism: while many Hungarians were proud of their national culture, nationalism as a political ideology came to define culture as external to the reality of the average Hungarian migrant – an impression diaspora structures brought to the fore through their support of folk and transborder culture. I conclude that in both the Hungarian and Venezuelan case, it was the state-based versions of the respective ideologies that repelled people, whereas the non-state-based forms appealed to some people eventually.

In the third section, I interrogate the pervasive ethos of 'apoliticism' in diaspora organisations. Despite individual members often expressing strong stances on political change in their home countries, and diaspora groups frequently emerging around shared political values, three of the four organisations I studied characterised themselves through apoliticism. I dissect the meanings attached to the label and pose the question whether apolitical claims serve political ends. I argue that as socialism and nationalism are tainted by their association with autocracy in Hungary and Venezuela, migrants conflate parties with the state, which explains their withdrawal from politics.

Lastly, I explore how my participants map the future through political vocabulary. I illustrate that, through their experience in the UK, some Venezuelans come to understand socialism as more aligned with their values yet still regard capitalism as the only viable solution to their country's crisis. Conversely, Hungarians struggle to

articulate a future through politics. Shaped by decades of autocratic regimes in the disguise of socialism and nationalism, they harbour deep distrust of political labels, often resorting to moral or pragmatic language rather than established left/right frameworks. This ambivalence reveals the enduring impact of autocratic regimes on political imagination – and raises the question of what it means to envision change without trust that political processes can lead to a better future.

Venezuelan migrants and the principles of socialism

When I asked Isabel what socialism meant to her, she embarked on an anecdote. A few years prior to my fieldwork, she and a group of friends attended a public lecture at a London university, hosted by Patria Bolivariana, which aimed to promote socialism through the example of Venezuela. At first, Isabel and her friends were incredulous that any Venezuelan would advocate for the ideology, having witnessed the damage it had caused. However, as the lecture unfolded, they made a surprising discovery:

> *When he was talking in English, we realised that he was not Venezuelan because of the accent and well, yes, we posed questions and stuff and asked him if he was from Venezuela and he didn't want to say where he was from. But we googled him, and he is from Barcelona, and he is leftist but never lived in Venezuela. What followed was an attack but an intellectual attack [from our part], because you are talking about this, but you are not from Venezuela, maybe you are here paid or something like that or you like the left, but yes, we started talking about the reality of the country, of what happened.*

When deciding to challenge the speaker, Isabel was convinced that their first-hand experience with socialism would grant them credibility. She was wrong:

> *The majority of the audience were English, they were students, and all of them very, well, let's say leftist, no? Or rather, I was like, they have no*

> *idea… And of course, they did not like what we did, and they said, 'we came here to learn, and you are disrupting our learning process'. I saw them as innocent, like they have no idea what they are talking about and of course, at that moment I understood a bit the ideological side of things, like how they sell this [socialism], the books, the model that they sell outside, and it was all quite a shock.*

Instead of condemning the students' attitude, Isabel felt a strange sense of compassion towards their 'naivety', likening their enthusiasm for socialism to Venezuelans' general attitude when Chávez first came into power: *"I saw these students who loved the left or who talked about Venezuela as something fancy or beautiful because I was once there. We were idealising Cuba but when I got to know Cubans in Venezuela, I realised that it was all a lie."* Isabel explained that during her university years, leftist ideals held a romantic allure: Che Guevara, and the revolutionary spirit of Cuba promised dignity, solidarity, and justice. She had once sung Nueva Trova songs with conviction, caught up in the enchantment they symbolised. But that admiration eventually faded when years later she started working alongside Cuban doctors invited by Chávez. Witnessing the precarity of their lives, Isabel began to confront the gap between myth and lived reality as she came to realise that the Cuba she once admired was a curated image supported by ideology but betrayed by experience.

In the lecture, Isabel and her friends' a posteriori experience of socialism in a real-world context clashed with the students' a priori knowledge of the normative political and economic ideal derived from secondary sources. Socialism as an ideology promoted emancipation and principles like equality, collective ownership, and the abolition of class distinctions. However, its lived forms in the context of 20th and 21st century state formations frequently involved authoritarian governance and repression, unequal

privileges, and economic inefficiencies – in the Venezuelan case, leading to an unprecedented crisis.

The question of whether the utopian ideas of socialism are possible to implement has long been debated. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the East had still not reached the promised utopian phase, the term ‘real (-ly existing) socialism’ was introduced to account for the discrepancy between the ideological framework and lived realities (Lebowitz, 2012). As Geoffrey Swain and Nigel Swain (1993) explain, although the Soviet Union professed a long-term dedication to the goal of worldwide revolution, its immediate priorities were largely geopolitical in nature. In contrast, local communist actors who had brought revolutions to power had been deeply ideologically motivated, shaped by years of resistance against fascism. By the time 1958 arrived, however, much of that ideological energy had dissipated, and the cohesion of the Eastern European states came to be maintained not through a shared belief, but integration into a military alliance and an international economic framework under Soviet control.

While socialism ceased to function as a language of emancipation, it continued to profoundly shape political, social, and economic systems through what eventually became known as ‘actually existing socialism’. Advocates of ‘ideological socialism’ contend that these outcomes stemmed from historical and political limitations rather than inherent flaws of socialist theory, but the tension deepened uncertainty about socialism’s viability. When Raymond Williams (1980) opens his essay ‘Beyond Actually Existing Socialism’, he starts with the claim that “Communism is not only necessary, it is also possible” (p. 3) because by the 1980s, the public was increasingly doubtful.

Isabel's story was just one of multiple testimonies revealing a broader yearning for socialism in Britain, which often led to the dismissal of Venezuelans' pleas for help. Core to this clash is the fact that political orientations carry different meanings across contexts. Daniel Auer and Max Schaub (2024) ponder the question in the following way: "What, then, is a liberal, democratic predisposition, and how is it expressed? In Western Europe, the attributes outlined by Goodman usually pertain to supporters of the political left (van Der Brug and van Spanje 2009). Not so in CEE, where, due to its legacy of state socialism, the relationship between self-placement on the left-right dimension and support for liberal democracy is much more complex." (p. 4). This understanding was also underscored by my participant Esperanza, who claimed that *"People here categorise the situation and create sympathy based on left and right, but these realities are not translatable to those schemes."* During my fieldwork, I often saw the below image with the text 'You are communist because you read it, I am anti-communist because I lived it' shared by Venezuelans on social media. With informants using 'communist' and 'socialist' interchangeably, it served as a caution about the pitfalls of socialism and a claim to have Venezuelans' experience recognised.



Picture 10. An image circulating on Venezuelan social media. The Spanish text reads 'You are communist because you read it, I am anti-communist because I lived it'.

"They knew about it already." Though many years have passed since Graciela took to the streets of London protesting 21st-century socialism, she spoke with such disillusionment that I felt her pain choke me in my own throat. Demonstrations had once been central to VeneHelp members' lives, so I was curious to know why they stopped. Graciela argued that their efforts rested on false assumptions: they believed that raising awareness would prompt swift intervention since the UK was a 'Western power'. Demonstrators would come together at key locations around London and share their stories with whoever would listen, systematically progressing towards their mission one person at a time: *"When I came here, the world was not aware of what was happening in Venezuela, so it was partially this, to make people see. We distributed flyers and told them what was happening, that there was a dictatorship, that there were so many deaths in so many years."* Then one day, waiting for the bus, Graciela noticed the Venezuelan flag in an office window. She approached to watch a report on the protests happening in her home country. Graciela's jaw dropped: she realised that help

was not withheld because people were not aware, but because they did not care – a revelation that would mark the end of her political activism.

Around the same time, Fabiola was embracing the fact that her documentary project had taken an unexpected turn. Initially intending to document the achievements of El Sistema, a Chávez government initiative empowering underprivileged youth through music, she gradually found herself capturing her country's political decline through the lives of these talented youngsters. However, she struggled to find funding in the UK for this new political angle:

> *For many years, everywhere I went, people were supporting Chávez and people didn't know, they saw it like this kind of socialist heaven or this idea of social justice that was happening. And you know, we all knew from the beginning that that was not the case, we knew from the very beginning, many of us were very worried about the consequence and you know, even raising funds for this film was so difficult because from the beginning when we showed some of the crisis, people were like, do you have a political agenda? Because they had the idea that the political and the system was working, and it was good for the people.*

Several years after the lecture Isabel described, attending my first Patria Bolivariana get-together, I immediately recognised the speaker she had talked about. Originally from Spain, after moving to Britain, Julio became a member of a socialist circle and when the 2002 coup attempt happened in Venezuela, he was part of a delegation sent to the country to investigate. He concluded that a lot of what was said about Chávez in the UK was propaganda and has since travelled to Venezuela yearly to monitor the situation. However, he mentioned that the pandemic made them grind to a halt and now they were struggling to regain momentum. While I was all too familiar with how Covid affected communities, his confession suddenly took on a different meaning when, after the invited speaker's speech, Julio took the opportunity to ask the first question:

> *The title of this talk is Challenges and threats to the Bolivarian revolution. [...] But my question is this: is there a Bolivarian Revolution still? Because when we all got involved in this [...] there was a revolution in Venezuela. Because what we have been defending all these years is not just the government and the use of the country's resources for social programmes, which is very good in itself and it is a policy that not many other governments follow, and it did transform the lives of millions of people in Venezuela. But what we were excited about was that in Venezuela, there was a revolution, a mass popular movement that is taking control of its own destinies. [...] But we have to make a balance sheet: what is the situation now? We can look for the causes, but the situation now is completely different in my opinion: you do not have a government that is pushing the revolutionary movement forward, you have a government that is, on many occasions, is in direct contradiction with the revolutionary movement.*

An air of discomfort filled the room. I wondered if his frequent trips had exposed him to a reality he was not comfortable with. Some people attempted a hesitant nod, looking around for others' reactions, before Inés and Esteban, the two Venezuelan members present came to the regime's rescue.

Despite the cracks that began to show, the group – minus Julio – came together again a few weeks later for the debut of Inés's second documentary. To set the scene, Inés asked us to close our eyes and imagine someone entering our homes uninvited, taking all our money, and blocking access to our bank accounts to help us grasp the damage US sanctions have caused, which she blamed for Venezuela's crisis. Watching her prop up the projector with a book on the outstanding leadership of Chávez, I spotted that the Apple icon on her Mac was covered with a sticker of Trump tied up with ropes. It was clear that opposing capitalism and the imperialist policies of Western powers was central to her identity.

Although, as I explained in Chapter 4, Inés's political engagement was sparked by a family tragedy, her approach to socialism was also shaped by her experience in the UK. In response to my interview question on employment, after mentioning her paid job, she listed an impressive range of voluntary activities. Beyond helping at an allotment and local collective to distribute food to poor families and producing radio shows to support decolonisation by exploring the stories of the Windrush generation, she was also a trustee of a charity helping African refugees through English language education. For Inés, socialism meant combating the disadvantage she saw around herself, a goal that shaped her self-assigned place in society. In many respects, her support of Venezuela's 21st century socialism was not a reflection of conditions in Venezuela but assembled

based on the reference points available to her in London, arising through a bottom-up type of socialism – and as such, purely ideological.

Inés had a dual mission: to gather support for the Venezuelan regime and to steer the UK towards socialism, beginning by abolishing the monarchy, and redistributing the royal family's wealth to fund social reforms for the masses. She produced her films primarily for a British audience, and when she noticed my growing curiosity, she invited me on a trip to Venezuela she organised to promote socialism amongst British participants. When I shared the itinerary with some Venezuelan friends, they were confused. The trip revolved around visiting communes, but my friends were not aware of a single commune in their area. However, the real shock came when they saw that the trip included luxury elements like a helicopter ride above the Angel Falls, which – they all agreed – was the antithesis of socialism. Their comments immediately brought to mind the elderly Venezuelan banker wearing an extravagant pink suit and bling, whom Inés had earlier introduced as a Chavista friend from Miami.

Over time, two distinct views on socialism emerged among Venezuelans who had experienced the crisis in Venezuela. More recent migrants often criticised socialism as untenable, arguing that its core ideas were fundamentally at odds with human nature. In Rafael's accounts, the emphasis was on the tension between utopian narratives of progress towards a just society and humans' tendency to act out of self-interest or inertia. He offered a metaphor of a school class, stating that if there were 30 kids and everybody was guaranteed the same marks, the top achievers would not push themselves, but neither would the bottom ones be inspired to do better. *"The problem with socialism is that it eliminates all the social classes. We used to be upper middle.*

Not like ten cars, but all of us would have our own car. Come on, my father is an engineer, my mother is a university professor. Now it's only the extremely rich and the lower classes as everybody is the middle is gone." – recounted Rafael, adding that just before leaving, his mother was earning the same salary as a cleaning lady, $5 a month.

Ignacio highlighted another aspect of socialism:

> *Until their money runs out, communists are fun. But when their money runs out, they start becoming… you stop being able to protest. You can protest in a capitalist country. […] When you live in a capitalist country, you feel that capitalism works. They keep telling you that one has to pay much. But you receive it back. The 'free' does not exist. If something is free, somebody is paying for it somewhere else. […] Let's take the example of an electricity plant. Like the one in Caracas. Which was private. It had an international guarantee stamp. The government took it. Nobody was paying for electricity. It stopped producing electricity. Because somebody has to take up the costs. Everything in life has a cost. […] Socialism is for idiots.*

Ignacio's 'neoliberal common sense' interpretation rejected the existence of free gifts and suggested that socialism rested on false assumptions about how society works.

Conversely though, Venezuelans who experienced Chávez's regime but moved to the UK sooner often adopted a more nuanced view of socialism, which emphasised that socialist ideology was not flawed, but its implementation failed in Venezuela. They often blamed the corruption of its core ideologies on the emergence of Venezuela as a 'narco-state'. As Rosa explained:

> *My parents are Chavistas, but ideological socialists so they have nothing to do with the government, it's simply that they believe in an ideology and a social model. […] When you're a student, you're young, you say, oh yeah, of course all the ideas, of course it's all so pretty, so beautiful, but when you see them practicing or campaigning for an ideology and at the same time they're getting rich and they're filling their pockets with money and they travel to the United States and they travel all over the world spending a fortune on champagne, that's when you say, that doesn't work, it's not like that. And I'll tell you something because my grandfather was the founder of the Communist Party of Venezuela […] and my grandfather never went to the United States, he never had anything, it was simply an ideology, he didn't even have a house to live in, he lived in a boarding house, in a hostel,*

> *so to speak, because he was part of a group of people who were intellectuals who fought against right-wing dictatorships […] These are not communists, it's a dictatorial, drug-trafficking regime.*

Past conditions of existence shape dispositions and phenomenological anthropology (e.g. Jackson, 1996, Ram and Houston, 2015, Leistle, 2022) reminds us that lived experience carries moral and affective weight that cannot be captured by ideology alone. However, after a prolonged period spent in the UK, Venezuelans started renegotiating their apprehension towards socialism and embraced the possibility that an alternative implementation might not only be possible, but – to quote Raymond Williams – also necessary. The same Graciela who participated in demonstrations to denounce 21st century socialism concluded our conversation by emphasising a view of Venezuela as inherently socialist: *"There are no right-wing parties, it's all centre or left. Chávez was the most leftist. But all these parties, Acción Democrática, Copei is a bit more conservative, but Acción Democratica, the traditional parties and Primero Justicia, that of Leopoldo López and all that, are moderate left or socialist. Which means that all of us Venezuelans were socialists, we were just not consciously aware of it."*

As part of this renegotiation of collective identity in the UK, Venezuelans often came to emphasise socialism's values of equality, collective welfare, and social justice, commending its bottom-up version, while staying sceptical of a top-down approach involving the state. Paradoxically, such realisations also filled some people with a perverse sense of pride in their country collapsing to a socialist system, rather than, for instance, fascism. The challenge – as some participants put it – was to find a way back to

the original ideology after the shock inflicted on Venezuela under the guise of the ideology.

Hungarian culture as a political tool[5]

I spotted the kokárda before I saw Enikő. In my childhood, the small circular flag she wore above her heart was a familiar sight with national days approaching. Nonetheless, having been appropriated by Fidesz as a 'party badge' (Spirk, 2003), the symbol felt out of place in the diaspora, where most people opposed the party. While it made Enikő's political leanings clear, she insisted on one condition when I asked her for an interview: no politics. Still, she would repeatedly drift toward statements in support of Fidesz, only to cut herself off, whispering, *"this is getting too political"*. She only relaxed once she realised that I was not challenging her views, making me understand how much her support of Fidesz complicated her ties with Hungarians in the UK.

Enikő's political engagement differed from Inés's. She would never consider joining protests and highlighted 'placing her X at the right place' as her greatest contribution, having voted in every election and referendum since arriving in the UK a decade ago. She believed every Hungarian was an ambassador for their country and it was their moral obligation to promote a positive image of Hungary. Like Inés, she criticised the local press for spreading lies about her homeland and saw it as vital to counter these narratives. However, most notably, Enikő expressed her national identity through participation in state-coordinated diaspora initiatives.

[5] Some parts of this section appear in my article Molnár, J. (2024) 'Diasporas Intertwined: The Role of Transborder Hungarians in Hungary's Diaspora Engagement', *Populism & Politics*. European Center for Populism Studies. 20 December.

When asked to share a meaningful experience, Enikő recalled an online event on the 100th anniversary of Trianon – designated a national commemoration day the year Fidesz came to power. The event involved Hungarians worldwide lighting fires simultaneously, called 'the fire of mutual belonging', and sharing photos of them. Remembering the event prompted her to confess that what she missed most about Hungary was attending national commemorations and the flying of the flag in person. Therefore, she often made sure to work from home office on those days to watch broadcasts live or recreated the atmosphere at Pannónika. *"It is such a profound joy when you feel this force pulling you together, when you are there, when we are singing the national hymn"* – she explained.

Nonetheless, Enikő shared a key trait with Inés: neither of them coincided with the regime they supported at home (except for the 1998-2002 period when Fidesz still represented a different ideological position) because by the time their preferred party came into power, they were already bound by the families they had established in the UK. Thus, their support was largely ideological, shaped in opposition to the alternative party, whose governance they did witness. Enikő described her emigration as motivated by dismay at the return of socialism:

> *I had no vision for a future. We don't have to make it explicit; everybody knows what happened in Hungary in 2006* [the Socialist party won the elections], *not what we have today. […] I was in public administration, I am not sure how much you are aware of what was going on back home, but I was always told that nothing had changed in 1989, it's the same people sitting there. I was thinking that my generation would come and redeem Hungary. That was my plan. I went to work at 8, they showed me my desk, they showed me who I would be sharing an office with. It was three other women. With one of them, I could immediately see that there would be problems. As soon as she went to the toilet, one of the girls looked at me and said we don't care who you voted for, we will never ask you about this, but please be aware that she belongs to those, and she is reporting upwards. So be careful what you say or it's better if you don't say anything at all [...] I*

> *just had to get out of there. At that moment, there was no hope that anything would change*.

Socialism's return as a state form felt like a slap in the face for Enikő. Her grandfather fought in the revolution against Soviet occupation, nearly losing his life, and for Enikő, honouring his memory meant ensuring that his sacrifices had not been in vain.

While Enikő's migration was triggered by socialism's return, for most Hungarians, socialism meant a past happily left behind, with nationalism becoming the new frame of reference. For its supporters, nationalism was also rooted in noble principles like self-determination, patriotism, and cultural preservation. When I asked about her support of Fidesz, Enikő explained that she found it inconceivable that anyone from any country would not feel pride in it or defend its sovereignty – thereby blurring the line between what Dace Dzenovska (2009) terms 'state-based' and 'non-state' nationalism.

According to Dzenovska, nationalism, closely linked to the nation project, has two distinct meanings that must be dissected. In contemporary discourse, nationalism often equates to neo-nationalism (Gingrich and Banks, 2006): support for right-wing populist parties that emphasise national superiority and exclusion based on ethnicity. John Dunn (1979) calls this the "starkest political shame of the twentieth century" (p. 55). Conversely, nationalism can also mean solidarity with compatriots, patriotism, self-determination, and cultural pride. While the former centres on the state and political power, the latter is grounded in individual histories and group belonging. Yet, the merging of these two is sometimes celebrated when it counters imperialism, as seen in contemporary Ukrainian nationalism, where patriotic claims entangle with the state's anti-imperialist nationalism.

Relying on the latter form of nationalism, migrant communities often embody what Herbert Gans (1979) calls ‘symbolic ethnicity’, expressing ancestral heritage through traditions rather than active engagement with the homeland’s political reality. However, through the incorporation of cultural communities as state-affiliated diasporas, the Orbán government created a system in which the boundaries have become difficult to disentangle. Many of my participants complained that patriotic expressions were now read as party allegiance, while supporting Fidesz implies endorsing the culture it promotes. Beyond co-opting the kokárda, recent years have seen the revival of symbols such as the ‘turul’ [Hungary’s spirit animal], ‘rovásírás’ [ancient Hungarian script], and the pre-Trianon map of ‘Great Hungary’, which have become associated with Fidesz’s xenophobic and anti-EU politics.

What complicated patriotic feelings for Hungarians was the ambiguity over whose culture state-affiliated diaspora structures embraced. I will never forget my first ‘táncház’ [folk dance event] during fieldwork, which I had originally intended to attend regularly for data collection. I was not particularly keen: Hungarian folk dances never felt central to my cultural identity. When I told my Venezuelan informants that I could not dance Hungarian dances, they were incredulous, asking if it was not a natural part of social life in Hungary, as it was for them. It was indeed not: although it was a compulsory primary school subject for a year, I rarely saw it practised outside staged national commemorations, and it always felt like something forced and artificial. As such, dance was also more exclusionary than in the Venezuelan case.

When I entered the spacious hall where the event was held, it felt as if I had stepped into another spatial and temporal dimension: most attendees wore traditional costumes, with

girls standing in circles weaving braids into one another's hair – a scene resembling a bucolic painting from 19th-century rural Hungary. Others sported T-shirts featuring funny slogans referencing their transborder origins, such as 'Transylvania is guarded by bears'. While everyone seemed 'at home', I could not shake off the feeling that I was an alien here. Panicked, I paired up with the woman whose accessories seemed the least pretentious. Noticing my awkwardness, she reassured me that she, too, had never felt drawn to folk dance growing up. Yet, in the diaspora, she eventually warmed up to it being the default expression of Hungarian identity and has now been a regular participant for 9 years. Despite her encouragement, after some failed attempts to keep up with my next partners' spinning routines, I felt completely out of my depths. Although I always made a point of staying through every fieldwork event, this time, I made an escape at the earliest opportunity.



Picture 11. Hungarian folk dancing at Pannónika.

On the way home, I tried to keep a mix of emotions at bay, much like those I experienced when applying to become a Kőrösi facilitator three years prior. The programme sought individuals who "possess outstanding professional expertise relevant

for Hungarian diasporas and have actively engaged in community organising, traditionalist activities" (website of the Kőrösi Programme). Although I had always excelled at subjects like Hungarian Literature, History, and Arts, I knew I lacked the qualities valued for promoting cultural reproduction in the diaspora. I was not a devout Catholic, which excluded me from certain assignments. I could not dance Hungarian folk dances, sing folk songs, or play traditional instruments, which closed off more opportunities. Having never been a scout ruled out yet other roles. Ultimately, I persuaded the board that my undergraduate degree in Language Pedagogy qualified me to teach Hungarian. Still, going into the job, I felt genuinely ashamed at how little I had to offer that the Hungarian state deemed worthwhile.

As my fieldwork progressed, it became clear that I was not alone in grappling with such feelings. At Pannónika's New Year's Eve ball – a bimonthly event my participants likened to countryside weddings 'only vaguely reminiscent of the Hungary they knew but enjoyable nonetheless' – three anthems were played to welcome 2023: the Hungarian national anthem, the British national anthem, and the anthem of the Székely people, an ethnic Hungarian group in Romania. While I was familiar with the latter from the biweekly church services, the person standing beside me looked confused, *"What is this? Is it something from the UK? I've never heard it before!"*. Upon hearing the explanation, he sighed and pulled a disapproving face. When I later asked the event's organiser about it, he explained that the anthem was a personal choice, dear to many attendees. The anthem's inclusion inevitably invoked Fidesz's controversial act of replacing the EU flag with the Székely one on the National Parliament: a move cherished by transborder Hungarians but viewed by many from Hungary as provocative and irredentist. The incident accentuated a tension: Hungarians seeking solace from

homesickness in diaspora structures, only to confront a hierarchy of cultural legitimacies that relegated their identity to a second-class status.

These episodes made me wonder who gets to define national culture and why certain forms of Hungarianness get elevated above others. Independent initiatives highlighted that Hungarians from Hungary preferred to unite around pop or high culture rather than folk or historic traditions. Popular events revolved around culinary heritage, ‘mulatós zene’ [party pop], literature readings, small-scale theatre performances, and talks by national ‘heroes’ such as comedians, journalists, or celebrity psychologists. In contrast, state-affiliated diaspora organisations approached culture predominantly through folk traditions as practised a century ago or in transborder regions – evident from the prominence of folk dancing, traditional crafts like Transylvanian woodcarving, and the enactment of peasant traditions. While these were often keenly embraced by transborder Hungarians, many Hungarians from Hungary found them alienating. As one participant, Balázs, put it:

> Balázs: *“I have been once or twice. But they have many programmes that do not really speak to me.”*
>
> Me: *“What would interest you more?”*
>
> Balázs: *“Something contemporary or modern, no matter if it is dance, art, anything, really anything, but something a bit more modern.”*

In her book ‘Movement of the People: Folk Dance, Populism and Citizenship’, Mary Taylor (2021) argues that the ‘táncház’ movement plays a central role in cultivating nationalist conduct and sensibility amongst Hungarians by (re)producing a ‘national repertoire’ from dances originally specific to villages, mostly in regions outside Hungary’s current borders. Such efforts date back to the interwar period, when the state

promoted land reform, voting rights, and cultural validation to uplift peasants in the name of dignity and justice. The aim of ‘népi-nemzeti művelődés’ [folk-national cultivation] was for all Hungarians to appreciate and adopt rural traditions, but it later aligned with irredentist agendas. During socialism, ‘táncház’ became a vehicle for educating people about Transylvania and promoting ‘national’ histories, including the struggles of ethnic Hungarians in Romania. This helps explain why ‘táncház’ participants voted overwhelmingly in favour of dual citizenship for transborder Hungarians in 2004. Taylor interprets these processes through Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) hegemony theory, which posits that ruling classes maintain power not only through force but by producing consent via cultural ‘common sense’. As Taylor argues, ‘táncház’ has helped form hegemonic blocs – alliances of social groups that sustain power structures – and thus continues to underpin contemporary Hungarian nationalism (in Kőszeghy, 2023).

Szabolcs Pogonyi (2015) argues that Hungarian diaspora engagement was designed to folklorise the emigrant population in order to strengthen Fidesz’s nationalist image. Framing diaspora as a claims-making tool (Brubaker, 2005), he interprets Hungary’s outreach as a non-instrumental identity project aimed at fostering national identification through education and a network of institutions that reinforce Hungarian identity. This is echoed by the Policy for Hungarian Communities Abroad (2013), which states that “The borders of the nation stretch as far as the influence of the national institutions, which help maintain the national identity.” (p. 14). Furthermore, as Margit Feischmidt (2020) notes, memory politics enhancing the cult of Trianon “became the engine of new forms of nationalism” (p. 130).

I argue that Hungary's diaspora engagement builds on 'folk-national cultivation', positioning folk and transborder traditions as national culture. Nonetheless, in Fidesz's diaspora engagement, folk revival targets a largely cosmopolitan, urban migrant population, many of whom struggle to relate to the activities on offer. A former Kőrösi facilitator I met through my previous research in Ireland reflected on this disconnect: *"In my opinion, the ideal candidate was* [name of another delegate], *because on the one hand, she is from Transylvania, so that is somehow important. These days those who are not from Hungary are often considered more Hungarian than us, excuse me for my honesty."* (in Molnár, 2018). While culture is often defined as "the stories people tell themselves about themselves" (Geertz, 1973, p. 448), which implies collective consensus, Hungarian diaspora programmes rely on culture external to the everyday reality of the target audience.

However, culture is not unidirectional. At the Annual Conference for Hungarian Diaspora Teachers, one presenter discussed the 'Gyöngyösbokréta movement' of the 1920s and 30s, which brought peasants to cities to disseminate folk traditions. The way she described the programme was an eerie reminder of the Kőrösi Programme: *"The programme enjoyed massive material and political support, but it also changed the relations of those viewed to be in possession of the 'desired' culture to their own folk origins as it was no longer out of respect for their culture that they put on their folk costumes and danced their traditional dances, but because it enabled them to break out of the everyday rut, explore 'the world' and go to Budapest."*[6] A common critique of the Kőrösi Programme centred on delegates' cosmopolitan aspirations, with many never returning to Hungary after their assignments. While this generally evoked concern for

[6] Quoted by courtesy of slides provided by the presenter, whose identity is kept anonymous.

the state ‘losing’ cultural ambassadors, a pre-state-affiliation director of Pannónika offered a disparate comment: *“They often get stuck in the host country. It’s a pity they don’t bring their experience back, because Hungary could really benefit from some English mentality.”*

Resistance to practice forms of culture one did not identify with often merged with opposition to the Orbán regime. A term I frequently heard during fieldwork was ‘magyarkodás’ [the active cultivation of Hungarianness], which was used to refer to an overly zealous display of national identity, particularly through elements of archaic or folk culture, which was perceived by Hungarians from Hungary as irritating and hence, best avoided. The term was almost exclusively used to express disapproval of Fidesz supporters or individuals from pre-Trianon territories.

In contrast, transborder Hungarians – long repressed as minorities and often marginalised when migrating to Hungary – thrived in diaspora structures as the utopian spaces that reunited Hungarians regardless of borders. While rules of peaceful coexistence dictated Hungarians from Hungary to acknowledge certain cultural practices as ‘theirs’, superiority was often asserted via an emphasis on the ‘correct’ use of the Hungarian language. Due to Hungary’s small size and easy transversability, regional variation inside the country is limited, whereas transborder Hungarians often speak a Hungarian fossilised at the time of Trianon. This tension surfaced when the Hungarian state appointed a ‘csángó’ [an ethnic Hungarian group in Romania] priest to support the diaspora: rather than confronting the nationalist narratives embedded in his sermons, frustrations were directed at his language use.

While most Hungarians maintained a cautious distance from both forms of nationalism, viewing it as incompatible with their efforts to integrate in the UK, faltering migration efforts often gave rise to its non-state forms, as evidenced by an active Jobbik presence in London prior to my fieldwork. Similarly, those who integrated socially but faced challenges in the labour market due to their Hungary-specific qualifications sometimes sought empowerment by assuming roles within diaspora structures, elevated by the state through teaching and cultural positions. Though typically part-time or voluntary, such roles enhanced one's self-worth and status in the community. Nonetheless, these positions often entailed involvement in political activities, compelling the adoption of 'state-based' nationalism. While some navigated pressures discreetly, others fully embraced alignment.

Thus far, I have juxtaposed Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants' evolving perceptions of their home states' respective political ideologies in the UK, illustrating that migrants' lived memories were often systematically invalidated when they clashed with dominant narratives of, on the one hand, their home states, but, on the other, of the host society. This created tension, strained coexistence with ideological opponents, and evoked the need to renegotiate belonging. In Venezuela, the conflict lay between abstract ideals and the often traumatic experiences of their implementation. Conversely, Hungary's nationalism used folk culture to craft an idealised, exclusionary identity, sidelining everyday traditions.

In both cases, it was the 'state-based' versions of the respective political ideologies that estranged migrants as socialism and nationalism became corrupted by autocratic states. Yet, non-state-based expressions of these ideologies often resurfaced as appealing. Earlier

Venezuelan migrants reawakened to the ideological resonance of socialism, especially in relation to group solidarity. Meanwhile, Hungarians embraced folk practices for their community-building value, independent of Fidesz narratives. In the second half of the chapter, I examine how Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants articulate visions of the future through a political vocabulary, beginning by making sense of the widespread ethos of apoliticism.

The ethos of apoliticism

It was Vínculo's panel discussion on home and belonging among Latin Americans, featuring two Venezuelan artists. The event marked the culmination of a month dedicated to art emerging from the Venezuelan crisis, with installations from the thematic exhibition still displayed in the background. Both Liliana's and Santiago's work engaged with the theme of nature in Venezuela, united by the idea of using the few remaining resources available to those affected by the crisis. Liliana explained the idea behind her piece in the following words:

> *I was thinking about reconstruction. […] You have to use whatever is left and try and make something beautiful out of it, right? So that's sort of like the whole concept and idea of me reusing cardboard and creating the surface for where I paint. So, I did those two paintings that were basically the exact same paintings, and it was very interesting because I was seeing how paint would react in a different way with canvas versus cardboard.*

The technique served as a clear metaphor for migration, with migrants' lives reassembled against unfamiliar settings. Nearby stood another canvas where visitors were invited to hang wrapping paper of food brought from home. *"Possibly the least political aspect of*

one's identity – food." was how the artists explained the idea behind this collaborative piece.



Picture 12. Artwork produced by Venezuelan artists reflecting on the theme of home and belonging.

Picture 13. A collaborative piece exploring food as an apolitical aspect of identity.

Both artists longed for apolitical spaces. During the panel, Liliana expressed her frustration at being forced to adopt a politicised lens: *"One cannot talk about Venezuela in non-political terms within my lifetime: I was born in 1991, and Chávez has been in power since 1989."* Santiago echoed this sentiment: *"I remember that politics for me started when Chávez won because it turned into something that was ever present. And before it was like yes, we had politics but without it really mattering."* Liliana perceived the option to be apolitical as a privilege as it meant that politics flowed in the background unnoticed, aligned with people's needs. She knew that spaces promoting this choice existed as she had found it in the UK. However, for Liliana, coming from a

politically fraught place meant that politics clung to her skin uninvited, requiring her to constantly channel her energies into dealing with it.

Liliana had complex feelings about being outside Venezuela. Though she had spent her childhood moving in and out of the country as her parents navigated the crisis – living for periods in Spain and the US before settling in the UK – she was now the only member of her family who had not returned: *"They understand it's a mess. But at the end of the day, home is home. And they're the kind of people that think that if everyone leaves, no one's going to be there to rebuild it. And you have to sort of like, just be there. And if you want change, you have to be there and actually make the change happen."* I sensed guilt about her absence in her words, coupled with anger that her family had to endure hardship despite their sense of duty – emotions she channelled into artistic activism. While being interviewed, her hands were busy drawing a bag for every Venezuelan who had migrated to make the crisis more visible: *"We have all had to pack our belongings and leave. So, whether you are super privileged and are able to pack a bunch of suitcases or you can only really just pack a plastic bag and leave walking… so, that's like the one thing that I thought unified us."* Yet the project provoked new anxieties: *"I do have fears. Mainly because I do have a lot of family back home. So, I think like I'm not scared now because I'm no one. Like I feel like my reach is minimum. So, I don't think it's like a problem for the Venezuelan government. But at some point, if whatever I say gets out there, yeah, I'm very scared because I do know a lot of people that end up in prison or something."*

The sentiment that politics became stuck to one's skin was echoed by my Hungarian informants. Many avoided disclosing their nationality unless directly asked, fearing

immediate association with Fidesz, even when they opposed the party. This is how Balázs talked about his feelings: *"I think the perception of Hungary is really bad in Western Europe and I have experienced it in the past couple of years that if I say I am Hungarian, then even the most average person will have heard what the political situation is like in Hungary. Especially in the context of the Ukraine-Russia war, how it represents a policy of non-alignment, and it is more and more unpleasant for me to identify myself as Hungarian."* There was a tangible yearning in both groups to shed the political skin tailored by the state and slip into an apolitical existence. Yet the more I reflected, the more I realised that apoliticism already surrounded me from all sides in my fieldwork – most strikingly, and perhaps paradoxically, within the context of diaspora organisations themselves.

VeneHelp, which relied on networks emerging out of early political demonstrations to fill the void left by the home state through humanitarian work, presented itself as apolitical. They carefully avoided partnerships or donations that could be linked to any political affiliation, even if Alejandra occasionally entertained the thought of aligning with the government. Pannónika also defined itself as a strictly apolitical space, despite its status as a state-affiliated diaspora organisation inherently tying it to Fidesz. The case of InMpulse was even more compelling: though originally established in support of a Hungarian opposition party, it gradually shifted from political lobby to a friendship group, with apoliticism operating as both a broader critique of Hungarians' political disengagement and a self-critical re-positioning. It was only Patria Bolivariana that openly and unapologetically embraced its political identity.

The strong emphasis on being apolitical stood in contrast to much of the diaspora literature, which discusses diasporas in terms of political power. Diasporas are approached as "sites for political resistance" (Braziel, 2008, p. 158), "highly politicised social formations" (Werbner, 2002, p. 121), with Mark Sidel (2008) noting that diaspora giving is often rooted in political motivations. Problematising the evolution of an 'apolitical' ethos means critically unpacking what this label entails, why it is claimed, and what political functions it may nonetheless serve. In this penultimate section, I examine each of the three organisations in turn, unveiling their respective reasons for being averse towards politics and explain how these stances correlate to the ideologies represented by Hungary and Venezuela.

In preparation for fieldwork, I spent a considerable amount of time online, searching for images of Venezuelan demonstrations in Britain and found ample evidence of both Chavista and anti-Chavista activity in the past. By the time I had arrived in London, however, the energy of anti-Chavistas seemed to have dissipated. As discussed in Chapter 3, anti-Chavista stances remained central to VeneHelp members' shared values, made evident by my acceptance into the group through the gifting of a hat with a political symbol. Nonetheless, through conversations with Alejandra, I came to understand that for VeneHelp, claiming an apolitical stance functioned as a form of self-control, perceived essential in navigating the structures imposed by the Venezuelan state:

> *You need to be very self-aware of what you write. And we are very vigilant on what is posted. But we do manage to be independent. I mean, it's not that... So, we talk about the crisis. We don't say this is because of Maduro, because of Chávez. […] I always say, how would you meet with director Dr Lenin or Dr Stalin if – you know, from the hospital – if you are politically biased? There is no way it could work. So it's really crucial that we*

> *maintain our neutrality. So we learned, we've learned how to do it. We made a few mistakes in the past, but not anymore, I think.*

Alejandra described apoliticism as a long-term investment to prevent the state from blocking VeneHelp's humanitarian aid: *"At the beginning, they were a little bit, you know, like, OK, I'm not, I don't see you, but you're there. I know, but I don't want to see you. And now it's much more open. And I think that because we're small and we don't make noise, we don't make political noise. This is why we have been allowed."* It was for this reason that Alejandra turned down the request of a major media producer for an interview on socialism – thereby rejecting a rare opportunity to exercise the voice previous demonstrations sought to gain. Apoliticism, then, functioned as a deliberate strategy, adopted precisely with the goal of achieving political impact.

At the same time, Alejandra framed it as a source of appeal for potential volunteers: *"I think that because of the way we do things, we keep working for Venezuela. We don't have any political agenda. We don't have any personal agenda. None of us wants to be kind of an influencer. And I think that there is a freshness there that, and a sincerity that is attractive to volunteers."* Having participated in VeneHelp's collaboration with IOM, I saw how deeply this guarantee was desired: when negotiating the terms of engagement, the top demand from Venezuelan diaspora organisations worldwide was that politics be kept out. While many Venezuelan migrants held strong political views, there was widespread fatigue with political activism, especially given how little migrants' efforts had previously achieved. Instead, new frameworks were sought for aiding Venezuela. This shift stemmed partly from the emerging belief that the country's crisis was not attributable to political parties but resulted from broader geopolitical struggles in which Venezuela had become entangled, as disillusionment with the

opposition further reinforced the view of politics as a corrupting force. Claiming an apolitical stance served to separate Venezuela from its tainted politics and positioned humanitarian organisations on the moral high ground.

Apoliticism was also seen as a precondition for VeneHelp's collaboration with IOM. In multicultural neoliberal settings like the UN, apolitical organisations are praised as safe and manageable partners, while overtly political groups are often defunded or surveilled, rendering apoliticism an instrument of governmentality (Haggar, 2024). However, political neutrality is frequently a strategic myth rather than a genuine disinvolvement. It may serve to avoid conflict, secure funds, or remain within legal bounds, but in doing so, it often sustains existing structures instead of challenging them. Pedro Silva Rocha Lima's (2022) research highlights that humanitarian organisations often re-affirm the status quo, with Sarah Haggar (2024) confirming that apolitical stances conceal contradictions and ultimately reinforce state power.

The perception of politics as something dirty, immoral, and polarising was common among Hungarians. During my fieldwork, a Hungarian comedian and former opposition leadership member was invited by an independent entertainment company to perform for an emigrant audience. In her show, she reflected on the challenges involved in transforming an idealistic youth movement into a political party – a process that underscored the impossibility of engaging in Hungarian politics without resorting to 'dirty tools'. A memorable anecdote involved senior members of the old socialist party offering campaign materials under the guise of support, only to reemerge to seek favours, drawing them into a web of political obligations. Leaving the show, I

overheard several remarks by attendees on apoliticism being the only way to preserve one's integrity.

In Sonia Lam-Knott's (2018) study, the population of Singapore was often perceived as "apathetic and 'uncaring' towards the machinations of the political domain" (p. 25). Yet, behind the reluctance lay complex meanings: politics was viewed as dirty, as "something someone else deals with" (p. 31), and those seeking change were labelled 'radicals' or 'troublemakers' (Lam, 2004, p. 184). Lam-Knott traces such perceptions back to Singapore's colonial legacy. As Matei Candea (2011) notes, "the boundaries between what is and what is not political are an important part of reality" (p. 314), shaped by particular histories and power structures. Similarly to Lam-Knott's participants, under socialism, Hungarians were discouraged from expressing political opinions, which fostered the belief that politics did not belong to the average citizen. Many still struggle to articulate political preferences, with resistance to becoming political also rooted in the fear instilled, whereby even mild criticism of the ruling party could result in arrest or blacklisting. In both contexts, what may appear as political apathy is better understood as a learned survival strategy shaped by autocratic or colonial pasts that framed political engagement as dangerous or socially deviant.

The first time I attended an InMpulse gathering, I impatiently waited for the conversation to turn to politics. I already knew that the organisation focused more on supporting Hungarians locally than on engaging in transnational politics, with its most celebrated campaigns including the help extended to Hungarians in obtaining settled status. Still, the monthly meeting held in an Islington pub was not what I expected: participants discussed everything from football to AI, but nothing remotely political. Perhaps sensing my

confusion, the head of the organisation cracked a joke about how little politics featured in these meetups. Unable to hide my disbelief, I turned to the person next to me, asking bluntly: so what is InMpulse all about? He looked at me as if the question had emerged out of nowhere and dodged it with a half-joke: *"Well, what keeps us together is our shared hatred of Orbán and Jimmy Zámbó* [a Hungarian pop singer who accidentally shot himself dead when showing off his weapon collection] *– yes, we are kept together by the shared enemy."*

While a sense of defeat after the 2022 elections was palpable, I knew something deeper was at play. Beyond directing the local InMpulse chapter, Ödön was also on the leadership team of his former UK university's Hungarian alumni club, with his engagement stemming from an early sense of rejection by the local population. As an undergraduate at the prestigious institution, he had hoped to make British friends but found that *"British people just weren't that interested"*. He instead turned to the local Hungarian Society, where he found a strong sense of belonging. In many ways, InMpulse felt like a continuation: a selective space for opposition-minded intellectuals, attracting those reluctant to engage with the broader Hungarian migrant population for fear of compromising their social or cultural capital. Ödön often described the nation as a community essential to selfhood, and he believed InMpulse's community-building goals aligned with state programmes like the Kőrösi Programme. The difference, however, was that InMpulse sought to create a superior circle, a perception echoed by Balázs, the ex-diplomat:

> Balázs: *"So, there's this InMpulse community. This is a community made up of young, progressive Hungarians. To me, that's what it's about: a community of young, intellectual Hungarians."*
>
> Me: *"And for example, what's your purpose in going there?"*

> Balázs: *"What is my purpose? To talk to other Hungarians, to keep in touch a bit with the local Hungarian community. I always had good conversations there. For example, I met you there too. I always met interesting people there. That's all. It doesn't serve a political purpose – we've let go of that."*
>
> Me: *"Did it use to?"*
>
> Balázs: *"Well, a few years ago maybe it could have had, but even then, there wasn't much of a chance. [...] Now it's more just about the social aspect."*

Another member, Dénes, further illustrated how activities typically associated with diaspora activism, such as protests, could take on a distinctly apolitical character. Similarly to Balázs, he first emphasised the social aspect of membership: *"InMpulse is like… well, for one and a half years, I was partying with them and then there was a Halloween party when I was told that it was high time that I joined. So then I did. […] Peer pressure was part of it. So, for me, it's more about the community, the political part, apart from some major gossips, really does not interest me."* He then shared his experience of taking part in a homeless demonstration, where 8-10 InMpulse members spent the night outside the Embassy:

> Me: *"And you joined this more for fun or because of its message or what was the exact reason?"*
>
> Dénes: *"Well, 70% fun and 30% message, I think something like this. Yes, 70/30, but there is also an element of… luckily, I don't know what it is like to be homeless. This was like a homeless bootcamp for me."*

Notwithstanding, the leadership was convinced that their apolitical stance was the fault of Hungarians, who disengaged from politics. *"The general attitude"* – explained Ödön – *"was that 'I did not leave Hungary behind for politics to follow me here'."* He spoke with disillusionment about how, whenever they posted major news or donation campaigns, they would unfailingly receive outraged messages asking them to spare

Hungarian migrants from homeland politics. For many Hungarians, politics was seen as an unwelcome threat that could unexpectedly stain their lives and while Michel Foucault (1982) argues that the diffusion of state power transforms all individuals into political subjects, Hungarians believed they could opt out through migration.

The view of political engagement as something threatening became evident on the very first day of my preliminary fieldwork at Pannónika. Throughout dinner, a printed A4 sign declaring that 'this is an apolitical space' stared me in the face from across the wall – a painful reminder of my flawed categorisation of the organisation as pro-regime. Historically, Pannónika served as a sanctuary for Hungarians of all political convictions or none, particularly important given that many of the early arrivals fled for political asylum. Despite its liberal stance, apoliticism was a deliberate strategy to prevent internal division among members. However, this ethos came under threat when Pannónika transformed into a state-affiliated diaspora organisation, in which context emphasising the organisation's apolitical nature became an act of resistance against migrant initiatives being sacrificed on the altar of political struggles.

Amongst Hungarians and Venezuelans, politics was predominantly seen as a curse infiltrating lives and rotting them from within. Seeing no way to use politics to their advantage and feeling that politics ruled them rather than the other way round, my informants rejected its transformative potential and kept it separate from their lives. The prevailing attitude of *"If you want change, you have to fight using corrupt tools too."* made Hungarians reluctant to unite under any political agenda, fearing it would reintroduce hypocrisy into their lives. Many Hungarians also felt that political shifts were meaningless: having been failed by both the left and right, they questioned the

point of engagement. Politics was similarly associated with repression among Venezuelans, fuelling distrust and a shift towards strategies perceived as 'detachable'. This raises an important question: in what ways can an apolitical stance shape a vision for the future? The following section explores this issue.

Political visions of the future[7]

It was the busiest season at Mesa Criolla's kitchen, as the team gathered to prepare hundreds of hallacas for the approaching Christmas season. Upon entering the restaurant, I immediately recognised Celia, who was leading the hallaca operations. She had gained something of a celebrity status within London's Venezuelan community after Mesa Criolla shared a deeply emotional video in which she burst into tears describing what the Christmas dish meant to her as a migrant. As the video circulated on social media, I found myself watching it repeatedly, often fighting back tears. In just two minutes, Celia captured the Venezuelan crisis more poignantly than the best academic accounts. As we began the elaborate cooking process, her teammates teased her. The restaurant's owner put on an American accent, pretending to be Trump, who had called to request a meeting with Celia, claiming that her heartfelt testimony had boosted sales, and he needed a marketing manager just like her.

Soon, a new batch of dough needed to be prepared, and Celia beckoned me to follow so she could explain the use of the different corn flours. In the privacy of the pantry, she remarked, "*You know, Judit, in Venezuela, we have a saying: when there's a crisis,*

[7] Some parts of this section appear in my article Molnár, J. (2024) 'Diasporas Intertwined: The Role of Transborder Hungarians in Hungary's Diaspora Engagement', *Populism & Politics*. European Center for Populism Studies. 20 December.

some people cry, and others build a tissue factory." Her voice blended self-mockery with reproach. Celia, I sensed, was the one who would cry. She had spent most of her life working as a respected oncologist, and transitioning to life in London had been difficult: due to her age, she could only find work as a kitchen assistant. She did not mind, though: she needed to stay busy to keep herself from thinking, and with a grandchild on the way, the money was welcome as well.

"Do you see this brand?" – Celia asked, pointing to the corn flour's packaging. *"Building a 'tissue factory' is exactly what the owner did."* She explained that when mass migration from Venezuela first started, the successful businessman opened corn-processing plants in Colombia, Italy, and Spain, anticipating that Venezuelans would miss their beloved products. There was a strong sense of moral ambivalence in her voice, which is why her next sentence caught me off guard: *"Many of us want him to be president*." The astonishment she saw on my face prompted her to continue: *"One thing is that despite everything, he never left Venezuela. That inspires many people. But most importantly, he is a very clever man and a great manager who knows how to generate profit – this is what Venezuela really needs now."*

The Christmas episode, in which the businessman was the epitome of capitalism, illustrated the ideology as simultaneously deeply problematic and the only viable path forward for Venezuela. While this ambivalence was common among my Venezuelan informants, I initially struggled to understand why Celia would support a political system that conflicted with her values. I eventually grasped the contradiction through a makeshift Venezuelan 'citizenship ceremony'. Oriana, an elderly participant, asked her granddaughter, raised in the UK, to create a few trinkets in Venezuelan colours for the girl

who was to be declared Venezuelan. She embraced the task, crafting a bracelet, a notebook, and some smaller items but then quickly handed a bill to Oriana, insisting that she had been commissioned to do the work. Oriana's reaction was a mix of outrage at this distinctly capitalist gesture, and relief that her granddaughter had acquired some necessary life skills.

Despite general agreement on the need to reclaim Venezuela by removing the current regime, Venezuelan migrants held no consensus on how this should happen. A common belief was that Venezuela's future depended on intervention by 'the West', particularly the United States – seen as an ideological counterpoint and a power that had previously shown willingness to get involved. In this context, some even welcomed the prospect of war. The extremity of this sentiment was revealed when Rafael asked about the practical purpose of my research. When I suggested that it might help create a better future for people like him, he replied sharply: *"No help is possible, the only possible solution is war. That somebody has to throw bombs and destroy the regime, put an end to the dictatorship and get those people out."*

Yessica expressed similar views: *"It is not a lost cause, but it would take an aggressive intervention, a restart. The system needs to be blown up."* She allowed herself to make this suggestion since she already perceived Venezuela's reality to be reminiscent of a warlike situation: *"Look, when I was still there, I participated in one of the demonstrations. At one point, the police directed this gas at us that makes you unable to breathe and cry. We started running and at that moment, they started shooting at us, so we were really scared. And one guy – I would not say that he was a friend but a friend of a friend – was shot in the leg and died."* Many argued that dethroning Maduro was too

big of a task for emigrants alone, but once it was accomplished by an external actor, emigrants would be ready to take over. However, while the US was expected to fight the war in the name of capitalism, many, especially earlier migrants, envisioned reconstructing their country as a democratic state with socialist traits inspired by Scandinavian models.

Nonetheless, Venezuelans felt let down again, a sentiment captured by a widely circulated meme. For a brief period, signs of international political support were visible, such as the Bank of England's decision to withhold Venezuelan gold. The UK's official recognition of opposition leader Juan Guaidó, welcomed during a visit, was pivotal and sparked both large celebrations among Venezuelans in the UK and a surge in donations for organisations like VeneHelp. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shifted global priorities, relegating Venezuela to the status of a *"forgotten crisis, overshadowed by Syria and Ukraine"* – as coined by Alejandra.



Picture 14. A widely circulated image among Venezuelan migrants illustrating that Russia's war on Ukraine diverted global attention away from the Venezuelan crisis.

Venezuelans were particularly baffled that, despite viewing Russia as the primary adversary in both conflicts, support for Ukraine mobilised swiftly, while Venezuela struggled to gain similar backing. Ignacio reflected on this in the following words: *"There are international interests involved in the country who are supporting the government. […] I am more certain that we are not fighting against a political party. […] They are a group of international criminals sponsored by Russia."* The experience of the Ukrainian war led Venezuelans to decisively conclude that geopolitical priorities, rather than ideological alignment, dictated which countries received international support. The final confirmation of this came when world leaders resumed negotiations with Maduro motivated by securing oil after Russia ceased to be a viable source.

Among Hungarians, a similarly strong belief was held about the world's indifference towards the country's fate. Many felt that nationalist policies had isolated Hungary from international sympathy. While some took pride in Hungary's self-perception as a 'landlocked island' culturally and linguistically, many saw this as a reason for the lack of access to global solidarity. 'Hungary has no friends', declared an invited academic at the Future: Hungary conference, describing the country's historically rooted and ongoing geopolitical position of marginality. At various commemorations of the 1956 revolution, it was stressed that Hungary might have changed the course of its own, and possibly the region's history if major powers like the UK had intervened. Furthermore, while my informant Lőrinc suggested that revolution might be the only way to remove Fidesz from power, he contended that he saw no chance for it to happen due to the lack of cohesion in Hungarian society and the absence of meaningful allies.

While my Hungarian participants – including some InMpulse members – lacked faith in opposition parties, they nonetheless regarded voting as important, the consensus being that while change was impossible, expressing dissent was crucial. Many admitted casting votes for 'Kétfarkú Kutyapárt' [Two-Tailed Dog Party], a registered 'joke party' that uses parody to expose the political elite's flaws. Another important motivating factor behind voting was to advocate for decisions to be made by Hungarians from Hungary. The Orbán government has long relied on transborder Hungarians for electoral support, enabling them to vote by letter since 2014. As Eszter Herner-Kovács (2020) notes, transborder Hungarians represent a strong political remittance potential as "politically active and organised communities with strong and effective ties to Hungary" (p. 1161). Ágnes Patakfalvi-Czirják (2017) argues that the nearly half a million citizenships distributed amongst the group created a moral obligation, for which reason she analyses transborder Hungarians' overwhelming support as a 'vote of gratitude'.

Conversely, Hungarian communities in Western Europe represent a significant opposition force. László Szily (2018) reports that only 7% of London-based Hungarians would vote for Orbán, while a 2022 survey by the 21 Research Centre found that merely 11% of the 5,000 respondents living abroad supported the governing party (in Rutai, 2022). Unsurprisingly, Hungarian emigrants to Western Europe have faced restrictions to electoral participation: letter voting is not allowed and, in 2022, those living in the UK were only granted three polling stations, despite the community's request for 15 (Czinkóczi, 2022), forcing some to travel over 1,000 kilometres to vote. The disparity between the voting rights of transborder and emigrant Hungarians led Myra A. Waterbury (2023) to describe the 2022 election as exemplifying "competing external

demoi" (p. 1), a situation in which the incumbent government selectively enfranchises and mobilises different external national groups, prompting counter-mobilisation by nonincumbent actors. One of the most striking counter-actions was implemented by UK-based Hungarians, who launched a successful crowdfunding campaign to cover travel costs for those unable to afford a journey to the nearest polling station.

Unlike the sense of disempowerment Venezuelans felt in the face of failed efforts for change, many Hungarians experienced apathy as a prudent response to a system they saw as beyond repair. The political right, enthusiastically entrusted during the democratic transition, was widely perceived to have caused 'irreversible damage', both economically and mentally, due to the erosion of democracy and widespread corruption. However, the notion of the 'left' remained fraught. For many, Hungary's past socialist era signified a regression that locked the country into a peripheral role and still evoked memories of repression and surveillance amongst the older generation. Despite today's left-liberal parties having little in common with the pre-1989 regime, the association remains, reinforced by the continued presence of the former socialist elite in some leftist parties. This reflects an erosion of the very capability to envision meaningful change. Consequently, many Hungarians reject alignment with the left or right altogether and see meaningful change as offered outside partisan structures, for example via civil society or technocratic reform.

Such tendencies resonate with Ignacio's earlier comment regarding Venezuelan people not fighting political parties but what he described as 'evil forces' that work against the public good. For many Venezuelans, politics had become so deeply corrupted that they saw no space for honest alternatives. These sentiments intensified as Juan Guaidó's

opposition movement lost momentum. After inspiring hope by declaring himself interim president in 2019, and initially gaining domestic and international support, his ‘parallel government’ remained symbolic and largely disconnected from everyday concerns. With some of his allies becoming implicated in corruption scandals involving funds designated for humanitarian aid and opposition efforts, ultimately, Guaidó’s name became synonymous with the fracturing of the opposition and a political stalemate.

In a lecture on contemporary geopolitics, Hagai M. Segal (2025) cited an open letter to a British newspaper, in which the elderly reader explained that despite his views on key political issues remaining consistent across his lifetime, they had come to align him with opposing ends of the political spectrum over time. This testimony highlights that political parties increasingly fail to function as stable carriers of ideologies and become shaped by strategies to grasp power instead. In such contexts, political identities may become unstable, with the fractured landscapes prompting many to distance themselves from party politics altogether.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I approached political ideologies as emotionally charged and historically situated frameworks that become renegotiated in the gaps between systems. As migrants confronted new political realities in the host country, they drew on former beliefs steeped in both lived experience and home state narratives to measure them against the promises of new political imaginaries. While both Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants left predominantly in contestation of their home states’ political regimes, migration opened a space where long-held ideological assumptions became destabilised, and in

some cases, re-evaluated. As the meanings attached to the left-right dichotomy shifted, state-based political ideology and the underlying values those ideologies claimed to uphold became decoupled.

Some Venezuelan migrants initially repelled by socialism began to reappraise certain elements of socialist thought when they became exposed to how socialism was framed and practised in the UK – even despite seeing capitalism as the only pragmatic solution to Venezuela's crisis. Similarly, Hungarian migrants began to reflect critically on how pride in national heritage became distorted by Fidesz narratives. In both contexts, my participants' initial discomfort was provoked not by ideological orientations per se, but their instrumentalisation by autocratic regimes, which, in turn, led to growing distrust towards politics.

The aversion felt in relation to partisan politics manifested in apoliticism: not an absence of political thinking, but a deliberate withdrawal from formal political structures seen as irreparably compromised, leaving migrant communities unable to articulate actionable alternatives using the vocabulary of politics. As a result, political remittances tended to be directed at contesting existing regimes, rather than devising new structures across borders. What emerges is a landscape of disrupted certainties, whereby apoliticism becomes a political stance in its own right: a reaction to the perceived betrayal of ideological promises by the state.

Chapter 6 – Return visits

Introduction

I entered the field at the start of summer, which was an ideal time to conduct participant observation in the Venezuelan community. One bazaar, festival, and get-together followed another, as people joyfully reintroduced events they had foregone during the pandemic. Summer, with its warmth and vibrant colours, helped recreate a familiar sense of home – something deeply needed given the barriers to return. Due to the difficulty of obtaining and extending passports, concerns about personal safety, pricey flights, exorbitant local costs due to hyperinflation, and sometimes fears of retribution on political grounds, many of my Venezuelan informants had not been home for years – some nearly a decade.

In contrast, my early attempts to immerse myself in the Hungarian community were largely in vain. I caught the final Book Club meeting before Pannónika closed for the summer and I eagerly jumped at the opportunity to ask attendees where I might meet more Hungarians. *"At this time of year? Probably in Hungary!"* – came the response. They were right: most people I contacted were either already in Hungary or were just about to leave for the country. My Facebook feed also began suggesting events with members of London's Hungarian emigrant community in Hungary: get-togethers for students studying at British universities; a performance by a UK-based Hungarian theatre company touring the country; one of my informants even told me about the 'elszármazottak' [an archaic word for emigrant] festival she was involved in organising in her home village.

Unsurprisingly, my initial impression was that Hungarians in London – especially compared to Venezuelans – had a fond relationship with their home country, reflected by frequent visits. Yet, when speaking about their re-encounters with Hungary, many informants expressed disillusionment – a feeling that made them hesitant to engage with Hungary more profoundly upon their return. Conversely, although my Venezuelan participants often renounced return visits, most spoke fondly of Venezuela and expressed a desire to return when political and economic conditions allowed. I became intrigued by this paradox and started to wonder what happened – or did not happen – during these stints at home that prompted Hungarians to keep returning despite their disillusionment but made them disavow connectedness to Hungary while in London? Similarly, I was also interested to know what sustained Venezuelans' emotional and political investment in Venezuela despite the lack of opportunities for re-encounters with the country. I wished to understand which elements of Hungary and Venezuela people longed for, which they despised, and how this translated into a particular rhythm of short-term returns as well as long-term aspirations – or the lack of them.

The framework of transnationalism highlights the dynamic, bidirectional movement of migrants who actively sustain ties across boundaries (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc, 1992). As Elsa Chaney (1979) puts it, some migrants navigate life with "feet in two societies" (p. 290). This chapter explores differences in homeward orientation among Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants in London as impacted by the two groups' ability and willingness to avail of return visits. Building on my discussion of symbolic aspects of return (Boccagni, 2011) in earlier chapters, I now turn my attention to physical re-encounters with the homeland. Understanding return visits as part of a broader concept of return, this chapter seeks to define their place and

significance in cultivating connections to the home country. I start my enquiry by exploring the ways in which the two groups' ability to access return visits markedly differed. I dedicate special attention to the extent to which geopolitical factors and home country conditions shaped decisions and transnational moral economies impacted emerging attitudes.

I subsequently examine the divergent content and function of the visits undertaken. I argue that amongst Hungarians, for whom transnational connectedness was facilitated by the ease of travel back and forth to fulfil caring duties, make purchases, and avail of healthcare services amongst other functions, the term 'return visit' loses its validity and the mobility practised can be more appropriately described as people assembling livelihoods across borders – characteristic of European social transnationalism, as described by Adrian Favell and Ettore Recchi (2019). I assert that Hungarians' cross-border mobility can substitute permanent return as it fulfils a plethora of functions that would characteristically trigger repatriation. I rely on the comparison to highlight that while the yearning for home is mitigated through return visits by Hungarians, it is in turn fuelled further by the limited access to return trips amongst Venezuelans. Their general unavailability unites the Venezuelan emigrant community around a 'myth of the homeland' and a collective longing to return, which, as an enduring desire, inspires a strong homewards orientation.

I also consider return visits as a platform to re-encounter the home state and temporarily re-subject oneself to its hegemony. I argue that due to the rapid deterioration of democratic rights that are reverberated through everyday experiences, the process was predominantly unpleasant for both groups, which often resulted in a resolve to distance

oneself from the home country. Due to the better availability of return visits, amongst Hungarians, repeated disillusionment provoked a shift towards investment in one's life in the United Kingdom. Conversely, amongst Venezuelans, the lack of access to such re-encounters resulted in an active homewards engagement, propelled by memories of pre-Chávez Venezuela.

I distinguish between the concepts of 'homesickness' and 'nostalgia' to argue that since homesickness can never be fully cured as no country is fully recoverable in its pre-migration form, return visits are key in enabling migrants to reframe their homesickness as nostalgia. However, if an opportunity is not available to confront the country's current reality, like in the case of Venezuelans, the community might collectively unite in the conviction that their country can be regained as it was before, which sentiment might motivate a strong homewards orientation and ongoing efforts to create the preconditions for permanent return.

The in-depth enquiry into the different physical and imaginary aspects of the home calls for a more nuanced distinction amongst pertinent concepts. I delineate three different notions: home country, homeland, and home state. I treat home country as a more open and inclusive term that encompasses various aspects of the place of origin. Denoting an administrative unit defined by a border that people have exited, home country embraces ideas pertinent to citizenship rights and obligations; networks of people present in a given area; as well as all the tangible elements that are found on its specific territory. I use home state to highlight the relationship that exists between migrant and the home country in a political sense. The concept of home state encompasses the sovereignty that is exercised on a state's territory, the political ideologies that the country adheres to,

largely due to the political party in power and the government that leads the country, as well as certain tendencies rooted in the country's history. Lastly, homeland is the product of people's imagination that might not correspond to the actual borders or reality of a country, but which refers to how migrants reflect the notion of home onto the metaphysical world. It embraces both the emotional associations and tangible aspects that are of significance when migrants conceptualise the place they identify with as their home.

Differences in access to return visits

David Timothy Duval (2004) characterises return visits as a "periodic, but temporary, sojourn made by members of diasporic communities" (p. 51) in their place of origin, which, according to Russell King and Anastasia Christou (2011), "range from a couple of days (e.g. for a funeral, wedding, christening etc.) to two or three months of summer holiday" (p. 458). King and Christou position return visits within the wider academic enquiry on return, which are highly pertinent to understanding return patterns as visits home help "to bind those transnational fields that are often the consequence of migration" (p. 458). Return visits are also widely recognised as essential in fostering transnational ties. Anne-Marie Fortier (2000) interprets return mobility as a 'performative act of belonging', while Sara Ahmed *et al.* (2003) understand it as a search for 're-grounding'. For emigrants, travelling back to the country of origin offers a chance to reconnect with both place and people, to reassess their sense of belonging, to observe changes and new directions in which the country is moving, and to reflect on

their decision to have migrated. In this sense, return visits can serve as moments where intentions to return permanently are born, redefined, or discarded altogether.

The two communities I studied largely differed in the degree to which they could avail of return visits. Geographical distance played a significant role as it rendered the price of flight tickets and the length of the journey hugely dissimilar. As Farid Miah (2022) asserts, "return visits are a fundamental characteristic of the intra-European migration experience […] Intra-continental visits, such as within Europe, happen more frequently compared to inter-continental visits" (p. 98). As I myself experienced, it was possible to work a regular shift until 4 pm and head from my workplace straight to the airport to be sitting in my parents' living room by the end of the day – even with the time difference involved. If one booked in advance, the whole journey could be as cheap as £25 in total, which was a price affordable even by people on the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum. Thus, a constant joke amongst my participants was that it was cheaper to fly home to Hungary than to take a train to the English countryside – a fact that made London-based Hungarians rely on trips home significantly more than those living anywhere else in the UK (Kováts and Papp Z., 2016).

Research shows that there is also a correlation between spatial proximity and the length of stay: when home countries are geographically closer, visits tend to be of a shorter duration (Miah, 2022). As return was a rather costly undertaking for Venezuelans, with the trip often requiring more than a day, most of my informants would not consider short visits home unless it was absolutely necessary. However, longer visits were often problematic. As a colleague at Arepana highlighted: *"It is not just that the trip itself is pricey, but you would normally need to take an extended holiday to make it worthwhile.*

But if you take that holiday, you don't work during the weeks while you are in Venezuela, so you end up paying for your trip twice." This luxury was not affordable on a regular basis by most of my participants, especially in the years following migration. OAS (2020) reports that in the context of the pandemic, there was a significant temporary return wave to Venezuela from neighbouring countries. However, this tendency did not extend to Venezuelans in London because of the costs and the administrative hurdles involved in the process, highlighting that the group in the focus of my study did not perceive the distance as easily surmountable even under circumstances of emergency.

Entry and exit regulations by the respective home and host countries also played a role in determining how often and for how long return visits were undertaken. Although Brexit has restricted mobility to a certain extent, as Miah (2022) points out, short-term mobility is still taken up the most frequently by those who benefit from the right to free movement. Those who secured (pre-)settled status in the aftermath of Brexit only need access to a Gov.uk website to prove their right to enter the UK with their national IDs. The ease of travel for status holders in and out of the country, coupled with the recently introduced passport requirements and limitations on the length of stay for foreign family members means that migrants' return visits have often replaced kin's visits to the UK.

Even if most of my Venezuelan participants entered the UK with an EU passport they held due to their ancestry – and thus enjoyed advantages similar to Hungarians in Britain – this did not facilitate their movement to Venezuela, where they were subject to a variety of restrictions. Since 2019, Venezuelans holding double nationality have only been allowed to enter Venezuela with a Venezuelan passport. Although Venezuelan

authorities accept expired passports for entry, travellers cannot leave the country without a valid Venezuelan document. Given the lengthy delays involved in processing requests for passport extension abroad – up to two years for some of my participants – many Venezuelans opted to complete the process while in Venezuela. This, however, was only an option for those remaining for an extended period. In some cases, participants felt they had no alternatives. Leandro, for instance, lived a short flight away from his sister, who had migrated to Spain. Yet, when she became critically ill due to kidney failure, Leandro was unable to visit her because his passport renewal was pending. A practical solution would have been to travel to Venezuela and extend his document there, but Leandro ultimately decided against it, fearing repercussions due to his political activism.

A factor determining Venezuelans' return considerations was safety. According to Roberto Briceño-León (2012), the rapid increase in crime is directly attributable to Chávez's legislation: as Maria Werlau (2014) explains, the sharp inequality between classes, institutional instability, and the underfunding of police forces all contributed to the decline of safety and provided fertile ground for criminal gangs' murder, kidnapping, robbery, and extortion activities. During Maduro, such crimes escalated further, often intensified by scarcity. In 2018, Gallup ranked Venezuela as the most unsafe nation in the world (CNN World, 2018) and according to the UK's Foreign Office, Venezuela has one of the highest murder rates in the world, with Statista reporting 52.82 homicides for every 100,000 people in Caracas in 2020. William Finnegan (2016) also highlights that 98% of crimes committed in the country remain unprosecuted. Although crime rates have dropped in recent years, my informants attributed this to the fact that criminals have also left the country in the mass exodus.

Amongst my participants, personal experience with crime in Venezuela was a core factor pushing emigration. Thus, the fear of being targeted again during visits was widespread. This was exacerbated further by the horror stories shared by people returning from visits. Vanessa told me that her blond-haired daughter fell victim to kidnapping attempts twice. The events were so traumatic that she resolved to limit her visits and not bring her children with her again. As she explained, children who do not grow up in Venezuela fail to develop a 'sixth sense' that would enable them to perceive imminent threat – rendering them incapable of survival in the country. People experienced security risks involved in various aspects of the journey. Several informants reported having their suitcases looted by airport staff: returnees are perceived as easy prey as their bags are normally full of presents. Another informant told me: *"there is this new system in Venezuela that when you pay by card, you have to tell the waitress your PIN and then they take your card away. It freaked me out every time as you cannot really know if it is a genuine way of handling your payment or if she is secretly taking note of your details and the next thing you know is you have zero money on your account."* Many of my informants told me that they could never fully relax in Venezuela as they constantly needed to be alert. Having got used to the relative safety in the UK, such circumstances caused them significant discomfort.

Additional concerns amongst Venezuelans were triggered by the prospect of potential retribution from the state. Liliana produced politically provocative art, arguing that migration did not make sense if it did not enable one to narrate their experience. She took solace in 'probably not being important enough' given the number of enemies the regime had. Still, a sense of unease followed her around: *"I think it's necessary to be able to talk. […] if you moved all the way across the Atlantic and you still can't feel that you can*

share your political views, then why [edited out for profanity] *did you move? If you feel you can't talk or […] you don't think that you can start a conversation about all the issues that have affected me my entire life, then why am I even here? […] But yeah, basically, I gamble a lot."* Most people had a nagging feeling regarding returning as they considered the regime unpredictable and vindictive. Their fear was confirmed by the story of Alejandra, the founder of VeneHelp, a non-political humanitarian organisation providing aid to Venezuelans in Venezuela. As Alejandra explained, upon a return trip, she felt threatened for her activities, an experience that made her stay away from Venezuela for over a decade:

> *In 2010, two things happened. I went there with my current [British] husband, and he was stopped and detained and searched for drugs by the national guard. We tried to bribe him, he said no. He managed to be released but it was extremely unpleasant. At the same time, I got there with a temporary passport, and they kept it. They didn't give me back my passport, so I thought OK, this is in retaliation of what I have been doing. […] I had a long period of time when I did not come back for personal reasons and because of the situation in the country. 13 years passed since I haven't been back.*

Such concerns were minor amongst Hungarians: some informants reported falling victim to taxi companies' trick fares or being overcharged in restaurants when the waiter overheard that they lived in the UK – scenarios they had previously associated with unsuspecting foreigners. While such incidents added a bitter taste to the journey, they did not normally act as deterring factors. Similarly, even if most of my informants had negative feelings towards the government, they felt the state had little power over them as residents abroad and as such, fears of prospective re-encounters with the regime had little to no impact on plans for return visits.

Transnational moral economies[8]

As Miah (2022) highlights, what differentiates return visits from other forms of short-term mobility is the presence of 'significant social ties'. Avtar Brah (1996) proposes the concept of 'homing desire' as an inclination deeply embedded within diaspora communities, whereby the return is largely driven by a wish to belong: a fundamental need for grounding or 'placement' through reconnection with the ancestral homeland (see also Jo, 2018). According to King and Christou (2011), migrants' transnational engagements are typically anchored in specific socio-spatial contexts such as family, kinship networks, home villages, or urban neighbourhoods: "a mixture of economic, affective and symbolic ties usually based on principles of reciprocity and solidarity" (p. 5). Jean-Pierre Cassarino's (2004) social network theory also underscores the importance of familial and social ties in shaping return mobility, with transnational moral economies significantly influencing not only whether migrants visit, but also when, how, and how frequently they do so – often pushing migrants in directions divergent from their personal preferences.

According to Miah (2022), migrants are often reminded of their moral responsibility to provide care, which demands their physical presence. Among my Hungarian participants, the predominant expectation was that if one genuinely cared for an elderly parent, returning to Hungary when that parent became frail was the appropriate course of action. Similarly, families with young children often described pressure from relatives to spend abundant time in Hungary to foster familial bonds and ensure cultural continuity. This demand became particularly visible during the pandemic, when many

[8] Some parts of this section appear in my article Molnár, J. (2024) 'The Role of Transnational Moral Economies in Return Visits amongst Hungarian and Venezuelan Migrants in London'. In I. Sirkeci (ed.) *The Migration Conference 2024 Selected Papers*. London: Transnational Press London. pp. 231-236.

Hungarians took advantage of remote working arrangements to return temporarily, motivated by a desire to shield ageing parents. In some cases, the obligation to provide care extended to healthy relatives who expressed a need for companionship. One mother at a Hungarian weekend school described this moral imperative as a constant source of tension: *"My mum has declared that she hates flying so she is not coming, full stop. She could travel whenever, but I can only go during the holidays now, so it is ridiculously expensive, but I am always thinking that she is there all on her own, so I have to go. And I feel bad because she puts a lot of pressure on me that I am never there!"*

Conversely, among Venezuelans, despite close family ties, being a 'good child' often entailed enduring the hardship of migration with resilience in order to send remittances and, ideally, pave the way for the emigration of family members. Many of my informants expressed sorrow over the loneliness faced by their elderly parents left behind in Venezuela. One participant pointed me to the film 'De Memoria y Escombros' [Of Memory and Debris], a poignant depiction of this reality. The film portrays two elderly grandfathers who remain in Venezuela after their entire families emigrate. Struggling to make sense of his new life, one is shown obsessively sweeping the floors of an abandoned gold factory to scrape together enough gold dust to finance a trip to his daughter's wedding in Canada.

Rather than returning to provide care for ageing parents, Venezuelan migrants often understood their duty to lie in staying abroad to support them from afar. Return visits were increasingly replaced by bonds woven through remittances, symbolising migrants' 'proxy presence' (Baldassar, 2008; Dalakoglou, 2010). When a parent became seriously ill, the typical response was not to return home, but to turn to informal crowdfunding to

bring the parent to the UK. Returning to Venezuela was often perceived as a sign of failure and a setback for the family – similarly to the Cape Verdean migrants described by Jørgen Carling (2002). For those raising children, moral obligations dictated keeping them in the UK to ensure their good start in life. Rosa described her experience of a visit home in light of such obligations competing with her desire to permanently return:

> *When I arrived home, I sat down on the bed of my childhood room which my mum keeps exactly as I left it, everything the same… I sat down and the feeling took over me that I wanted to stay. I don't want to return to England, I don't want to, no, no, no. But then I talked to my mum, and she said no, of course you have to return for your family and for your children's future. She also told me this feeling would pass, but it hasn't.*

As Russell King *et al.* (2013) argue, return visits are rarely experienced on a 'level playing field' due to the complex interpersonal dynamics involved. Julia Pauli (2021) further notes that social ties might emerge as a source of stress as demands placed on returnees are often overwhelming. In Chapter 4, I discussed remittance sending an intergenerational survival strategy, reinforced through communitarian values, that help families build resilience. Carling (2008) coined the concept of the "debt of communality" (p. 6) to illustrate that migrants returning home are often seen as repaying a moral debt – an expectation that renders them especially vulnerable to claims of entitlement. Similarly, Robert Smith (2006) calls attention to the perception of returnees as a "remittance bourgeoisie" (p. 50), an image fuelled by transfers home.

For my Venezuelan interlocutors, return visits came burdened with the expectation to shower everyone with gifts. Miguel, who had previously worked in a legal office in Venezuela but was in a precarious pizza delivery job at the time of our interview, told me that a flight ticket home cost £900. Yet, everyone understood that the real cost was at least double: as Venezuelans thought that money falls into one's lap in the UK,

migrants felt obliged to bring expensive presents. From his perspective, it made more sense to remit £900, knowing that the money would truly support one's family than to see no end to spending during return trips.

While remittances and excessive gift-giving were uncommon among Hungarians, Carling's insights on the power asymmetries arising from migrants' accumulation of linguistic and cultural capital, along with their legal access to the UK, proved highly significant. The desire for a 'good' or 'normal' life abroad, driven by the enduring 'myth of the West', remains a powerful narrative similarly to other post-socialist societies (McGhee, Heath and Trevena, 2012; Galasińska and Kozłowska, 2009; Rabikowska, 2010). Consequently, migrants' return visits are often seen as an opportunity to seek help promoting one's own aspirations for emigration, with the friendship of a returnee representing a tangible link to those dreams.

The Crossing is an amateur theatre company established by Hungarian migrants living in London. Through their weekly get-togethers, they collaboratively craft plays exploring their own migrant experiences, staging them for a Hungarian-speaking audience. Their most recent production focused on the complexity of return visits, particularly the emotionally taxing process of renegotiating personal relationships. The protagonist, Virág, is portrayed as a resourceful Hungarian woman who has built a successful career as a lawyer in the UK. However, she is surrounded by 'parasites' – individuals who exploit her rootedness in 'the promised land of the West' and demand various favours from her. She already has a friend living in her London apartment, another migrates independently but becomes pregnant and turns to Virág for housing

support, and during a return visit to Hungary, yet another begs her for assistance with her migration plans.

Just like in the play, many of my participants described feeling compelled to offer help, triggered by a sense of remorse when confronted with the declining living standards of family and friends back home. I listened as two participants described a growing sense of disconnect, likening their visits to those of tourists. One remarked, *"I can no longer place myself into that reality, to be able to discuss pop culture or how you apply for a housing loan because you have no other option."* The other responded: *"I really like being at home. It's really good. At the same time, it is easy to be at home because for me it's like a holiday, and I do not really experience the everyday problems that others would experience."* My participant Éva attested to mixed feelings of pity and detachment. While she witnessed the economic and political hurdles her compatriots faced in Hungary, she also sensed their envy of her 'good life' in the UK. Even if not everyone she encountered viewed life in Hungary as a struggle, Éva believed her presence served as a painful reminder that migration might have offered a different future. This awareness sparked her desire to compensate them for what she saw as the emotional disruption her visit caused. While perceived as bothersome, the tension experienced did not appear to influence her or others' rhythm of return visits to Hungary.

Content and function of return visits

So far, I have discussed how particular circumstantial and relational factors shaped access to return visits. In this section, I focus on the content of return visits. Relying on

Fortier's (1999) definition of return visits as performative encounters of kinship and belonging that unfold around pre-defined choreographies, I aim to unveil what these choreographies are for my two groups of participants. Although different theories suggest various typologies of return visits (e.g. Baldassar, Baldock, and Wilding, 2007, p. 139; Bolognani, 2014, pp. 106-13; Miah, 2022, pp. 99-102), for my analysis, I will rely on Hania Janta, Scott Cohen and Allan Williams (2015, p. 587) who provide a matrix of five priorities around which visits home unfold: social relationships, the provision of care, affirmations of identities and roots, the maintenance of territorial rights and, finally, leisure tourism. I will analyse the extent to which these patterns are present for Hungarians and Venezuelans, complementing Janta *et al*.'s model with the dominant 'choreographies' of my participants' visits.

Visits home amongst Hungarians were seen as a routine activity and therefore not an overly exciting life event. While the primary purposes of these visits were the maintenance of social relationships and leisure tourism, some people felt that the tourism aspect was forced upon them as an inherent part of the social obligation to visit relatives. Unlike the Turkish-speaking participants in Mustafa Cakmak's (2021) study, who would not consider a holiday destination other than their home country, my participants did not find Hungary a particularly appealing destination and often complained that it was a burden to have to spend all their time off in Hungary. *"You pay to go on holiday, but you are constantly stressed!"* – said one person, implying that it was not a holiday anymore. Trips home often left no chance to travel to other countries even if many people measured the increase in their life standards through the ability to travel. For instance, a Hungarian couple I met at Pannónika explained that they had already given up on the dream of purchasing an apartment in the UK as the price of

housing soared out of reach. However, they assured me that migration was a good decision as they could afford to go on up to three exotic holidays a year. During their first years, they used to return but as this left no time for ‘real’ holidays, now they made a conscious commitment to limit return and travel instead.

An aspect of return visits not highlighted by Janta, Cohen, and Williams but one in which Hungarians engaged abundantly was the pragmatic use of resources available in Hungary. The majority of my participants reported visiting healthcare facilities upon trips home. Although most people will have terminated their membership in the Hungarian health insurance system, they used EHIC cards provided by Britain to access free medical care in Hungary. Amongst medical visits, a particularly popular service was the dentist, which my participants proudly emphasised to be a reason for British people’s trips to their country. While the main impetus was the price difference, in my conversations with Hungarian dentists, they also highlighted people’s preference for receiving treatment in their mother tongue and their confidence that medical professionals receive higher quality training in Hungary.

Return trips often included visits to the hairdresser or beautician, inspired yet again by the price difference and my informants’ belief that Hungarians understood their style better. Visits home were also used to shop for goods that were more expensive in the UK. Some women told me that no trip home could be complete without a visit to second-hand shops so they could return to London with their new purchases. When I asked them if they were aware that most of the clothes sold in those shops were collected in the UK, they normally just shrugged their shoulders, telling me that the main thing was that prices were adjusted to the Hungarian budget. Nonetheless, due to

both Brexit and the recent inflation in Hungary – 26.2% in January 2024 according to Statista (2024) –, such experiences are slowly transforming, with some informants telling me that rising prices coupled with the control on products transported prompted them to reduce visits. An informant used to time his trips to coincide with the Hungarian pig slaughter season so he could fill his car with fresh meat products, but since this was no longer possible, he cut his three or four visits yearly to one or two.

Amongst Hungarians, it was mostly families with children who discussed their visits in terms of what Janta, Cohen, and Williams call affirmation of identities and roots. As Cakmak (2021) asserts regarding his participants, "although Turkish, Kurdish or Cypriot culture is reproduced in London, most members of the community believe that the country of origin is where their culture is lived authentically" (p. 5). The same belief was held by some Hungarian informants. Aranka told me she could not understand why some companies would bring Hungarian performers to the UK for makeshift shows when one could get on the morning flight and watch the 'real thing' in Hungary the same evening. Several of my informants highlighted visits to the theatre as a crucial element of their trips home in order to 'soak up culture' in their mother tongue. No matter if it was through participation in a traditional pig slaughter in one's home village or the attendance at a prestigious cultural event, the re-insertion into the culture of origin reinvigorated people's alignment with their cultural identities – even if, living in the UK, they sometimes started casting a critical eye on local traditions or criticised their 'inferior' standard in relation to what they were used to in London.

Visits home facilitated the completion of administrative duties. When I asked Éva, who had been living in the UK for over 15 years, what her experience with the Hungarian

Embassy and Consulate was, she told me that she had almost zero as she found it easier to fly back home to arrange paperwork. Given the impossibility of casting votes by letter, some of my informants also resorted to fulfilling their democratic duty in person. Lastly, some participants maintained land and property in Hungary that required periodic attention, underscoring Janta *et al.*'s point about the maintenance of territorial rights.

Compared to the pragmatic attitude of Hungarians, temporary returns among Venezuelans were often experienced as deeply spiritual events, given how rarely circumstances aligned to make such journeys possible and the extensive preparations they required. As such, they became imbued with what Loretta Baldassar (2001) calls a pilgrimage-like aspect: the "visit 'home' is a secular pilgrimage of redemption in response to the obligation of child to kin, townsperson to town" (p. 323). As Cakmak (2021) suggests,

> migrants visit their homeland to escape a profane environment of diaspora to gain the spiritual and nostalgic experience of memories in their ancestral land and either heal their identity crisis or help the identity construction of younger generations. […] The pilgrims of diaspora travel not for the sake of heaven or other transcendental benefits but to find assistance with their existential or identity questions by linking their identity to collective memory and ancestral homeland. (p. 6)

Amongst my Venezuelan informants, this pilgrimage-like aspect was made obvious by the many rituals surrounding these journeys. Lengthy preparations preceded visits not only in practical terms but also spiritually, marked by get-togethers to celebrate one's departure as well as their homecoming. People would regularly report from Venezuela, often by sending daily updates to WhatsApp groups they were part of. During her stay in Venezuela, Yolanda sent daily pictures of the very same view over Ávila, the iconic

mountain of Caracas, from her balcony. While an outsider like me would easily get bored of the repetitive photos, Venezuelan group members could not get enough of them, welcoming the images with exclamations of joy every day, noticing tiny changes in the scenery from the day before.

Baldassar highlights that pilgrimage-like trips are characterised by tokens taken home similarly to relics acquired during religious pilgrimages. According to Miah (2022), these are then placed in a special place in migrants' homes to express a symbolic link with the homeland. I frequently encountered such relics during my fieldwork. For a Christmas gathering, everybody was asked to bring a self-made gift for the Secret Santa game, but by far the most popular present was the tiny plant grown from a seedling a participant smuggled out of Venezuela. Upon hearing its story, people exclaimed enthusiastically *"A part of the motherland!"* and *"It grew out of the sweet soil of Venezuela!"*.

While most Venezuelans were preparing for a spiritual rebirth after a long time away, in the context of Venezuela's crisis, visits home often served to enact significant steps toward detachment. Some of my informants' stay in the UK had been improvised as initially planned visits of a few weeks extended to months or even years – emergency responses undertaken with little previous planning going into them. Therefore, return visits often served to implement the migratory decision that had never been made upon my informants' initial departure. Esteban reported with great sadness that despite working his whole life as a university professor, it came to a point that he and his wife could not sustain themselves in Venezuela and had to follow their daughter to the UK. He originally intended his upcoming trip to Venezuela to sit his habilitation exam,

which was meant to bring things full circle in spite of the circumstances. However, he already suspected that this was not going to be possible for political reasons. Instead, his time would be spent emptying the house he had worked for his entire life to part with his belongings. While similarly to many, he had left somebody in charge of the property, these arrangements were not sustainable in the long run. Such closures gave a bittersweet taste to the originally envisioned spiritual journey and often represented a final cut with the physical home country, after which it transformed into the unattainable object of nostalgic desire.

Due to the difficulty of regular visits home, another type of 'return' mobility became widespread amongst wealthier Venezuelans, namely what Peggy Levitt (2003) calls 'roots journeys'. Roots journeys are undertaken by second or third generation migrants to the ancestral home of their predecessors. Venezuelan migrants frequently entered the UK with a European passport, most often Spanish, Italian, or Portuguese that they held due to their ancestry, with different people having had differing degrees of exposure to their ancestral homeland throughout their lives. For example, as a child, Beatriz would visit Austria on a regular basis and was eventually sent to boarding school in the country whereas others only knew their ancestral homeland from the accounts of relatives. With Venezuela becoming an increasingly problematic travel destination, the focus of many Venezuelans' 'return' visits shifted to a European country, often corresponding to the secondary citizenship they held. For some, this country was the first destination after leaving Venezuela and as such, was a place of personal memories and friends to visit. Others took the opportunity provided by the geographical proximity to get in touch with long-lost relatives or visit places that featured in the stories of their

parents. Yet others had relatives moving to these places in the process of the mass outmigration, rendering them sites of emotional re-encounters.

Trips to European countries of ancestry often took on similar functions to those experienced by Hungarians in Hungary. Venezuelans would fly for long weekends to Spain or spend Christmas in Italy and would enjoy re-insertion into a bigger community of Venezuelans along with an opportunity to use their mother tongue, access familiar goods, and visit LatinX events, thereby reinvigorating their cultural identities. As Eduardo told me: *"I have almost nobody there [in Venezuela] anymore. Most of my friends and family have moved, so it's just a really empty feeling when I am back. My mother had to sell my childhood home and moved to an apartment somewhere else. I don't like to go and visit because I have no connection to that new place. It is better if I pay for her to come to Europe and then we reunite with family in Spain."* In Eduardo's case, the 'memoryscapes' (Miah and King, 2018) embedded in childhood have been disrupted to such an extent that the experience normally offered by return journeys became inaccessible and root visits came to be preferred.

Duval (2004) argues that as return visits serve to reaffirm social ties, reconstruct relationships, and re-familiarise oneself with the place of origin, they do not only exert an influence on intentions to permanently return but also assist migrants in realising such plans. However, Russell King and Katie Kuschminder (2022) highlight that return trips can equally serve as "a substitute for return" (p. 7). As Aija Lulle (2014) underlines, the corporeal presence or what John Urry (2002) calls the "compulsion to proximity" (p. 263) occupies a central position in visits home: these are "thick, embodied socialities where people are uniquely accessible, available and subject to one

another" (Larsen, Axhausen, and Urry, 2006, p. 280). The sensory and emotional experience can provide a sense of fulfilment that connection through video chats and instant messaging cannot. It is for this reason that Özge Bilgili (2022) concludes that return visits might have a negative impact on return intentions as they serve to substitute permanent return in ways other forms of transnationalism cannot. Due to the ease of return visits, Hungarian migrants were able to fulfil the need to maintain social relationships, accomplish caring responsibilities, and affirm identities. Therefore, amongst Hungarians, return was predominantly replaced by regular visits home. Nonetheless, as regular return visits were not available for Venezuelans to the same extent, they became cemented in a persistent longing and guilt over unfulfilled social obligations, with the unmet needs sustaining dreams of return.

In Chapter 2, I talked about my Hungarian informants' refusal to identify with the word 'migráns' [migrant]. A further explanation provided was that the word sounded too finite despite my participants' connection to Hungary being reversible. In Chapter 4, I also introduced Evelin, whose aspiration to become part of the Hungarian diaspora emerged with her desire to have children in the UK. She explained that despite having lived in London as a student for five years, she had never truly felt committed to the country: during term time, she remained in London, but during holidays, she would unfailingly return to Hungary. For Evelin, the prospect of having a job and raising children in the UK signified a permanent attachment to London that would reduce her time in Hungary to a few long weekends each year. Along with commitments to the cultural learning of her future offspring, this realisation was profound enough to stir feelings of patriotism she had never previously experienced.

As John Lie (1995) argues, in today's world "it is no longer assumed that immigrants make a sharp break from their homelands" (p. 304). Trips back and forth enabled by cheap flights, the freedom of movement, and the pre-conditions for a safe return have enabled Hungarians to be present in two worlds parallelly. It is for this reason that I argue that the notion of return visits does not do justice to the kind of return mobility Hungarians engage in as it does not adequately capture the qualitative difference between the multidirectional assemblage of livelihoods available to Hungarians and the pilgrimage-like travels of Venezuelans. Hence, it is more appropriate to talk about people assembling livelihoods across borders in the Hungarian context, which, although somewhat thwarted as a result of Brexit, still largely remains an option in Europe. Conversely, 'return visits' is a more appropriate term in the case of Venezuelans, who dream of a life in Venezuela, but feel hindered from return due to the political and economic conditions in their home country as well as pressure from kin to sustain a life abroad. This renders their temporary return erratic and permanent return the unfulfilled object of longstanding desire.

Re-encounter with the state

"During the first two years, I didn't go back home. For everybody I wanted to see, I bought a flight ticket to come and visit me. I felt offended by Hungary. It describes the state of my soul at the time if I say I was offended. So, two and a half years had to pass until I set foot in Hungary again." – this is how Barbara described her feelings towards her home country in the initial years of migration. As she explained, her life at home was far from ideal: despite being a musician with a university degree, she struggled to

make ends meet. She was often forced to balance several jobs in order to survive, which radically reduced her life quality and took a toll on her relationships. She placed the blame on the state: in her view, the system was designed to allow no escape from the rat race. For Barbara, return visits did not only mean reconnecting with family and friends, but that she was forced to let the state exert power over her again – even if only momentarily. As such, Barbara's decision to forego visits home was a statement of resistance.

More than a decade after the period described, Barbara played Virág, the protagonist of The Crossing's above-mentioned play. The drama unfolds in a Hungarian countryside village, where Virág undertakes a long overdue visit. While attending a friendly get-together playing Hungarian cards, one of her childhood friends embarks on a monologue about Hungary's duty to defend the country from migrants, clearly reproducing Fidesz narratives. Virág suddenly feels isolated in her thinking about transnational solidarity. Beyond being a migrant herself, in London, she had developed a special sensitivity towards the topic, which now renders her a stranger in the place she calls home.

Duval (2004) talks about return mobilities as 'testing grounds' during which migrants observe the changes that had taken place in their home country and evaluate how they position themselves within the broader social context. Similarly to the fictional character of Virág, for many of my Hungarian informants, going home was an emotionally draining experience due to the pervasive presence of Orbán's impact, which was seen to corrupt locals' mentality. "*You barely touch the ground, you can already hear people complaining and it just hits you: welcome home! As the plane is parking,*

the first thing you see is a massive poster announcing that 'Hungary is a family-friendly country'. And from that moment on start all the propaganda, all the brain-washing." – commented one participant. Similarly, I was always bothered by the fact that, driving to the airport, one of the last billboards implores: *"Don't go away!"*

As Dan Smyer Yü (2013) contends, "today 'the eventual Return' to the homeland seems to be more a myth than a reality either because the return is routinised for the diasporic individual or because the homeland is no longer felt to be a desirable place to which to return" (p. 8). This duality adequately summarises Hungarians' experience. Clashes characterised return journeys due to convictions already held pre-migration or changes that occurred in Hungarian migrants' thinking amid London's liberal atmosphere. Thus, Hungary's far-right environment often led to the incommunicability of the migrant experience and migrants' inability to identify with the country. Balázs described his conscious efforts to exist separately from 'the Hungarian reality' when at home: *"I try to exist within a bubble when I'm in Hungary. I really make an effort to avoid being surrounded by everyday encounters. But I can't avoid them, because for example, I use public transport. And, actually, I think that it's also a good thing that I have some first-hand experiences about how many poor people there are, and how much lethargy and gloom you can sense just by looking around."* He explained that the advantage lay in the reassurance it produced that he was in the right place in the UK.

Russell Bernard and Sandy Ashton-Vouyoucalos (1976) discuss 'reverse culture shock' amongst returnees, arguing that any migrant lacks preparedness for reinsertion into their home country. The shock often emerges from the fact that the imagined homeland does not correspond to the contemporary reality of the country. On the one

hand, places undergo transformation in migrants' absence, for which one catalyst may be a stark change of regime or the extremization of the old system, like in the case of Hungary and Venezuela. On the other, migrants also feel changed by their own migration experience and might even find it hard to relate to aspects of the home country that were present before migration. Such 'reverse culture shock' can also characterise return visits.

For Virág, the journey home became a distressing experience because of the ideological clash with her friend. Despite her longing to reconnect, she could not reconcile with the fact that people's thinking had been corrupted by official narratives. As such, on a micro level, what she experiences is a re-encounter with the state and the extreme directions in which her country had moved since she last lived there. With frequent return trips, such experiences became integral to the migrant experience of Hungarians from Hungary, creating a striking contrast with transborder Hungarians, whose return visits focused on the pre-Trianon territory corresponding to their origin. As they mostly imagined – and not lived – Hungary, they maintained a 'myth' similarly to Venezuelans and thus, were more susceptible to Orbán's narratives.

During return visits, the home country is unavoidably perceived in comparison with the more liberal UK. As Maarja Saar (2018) asserts regarding her Estonian participants, the UK has demonstrated other ways of societal functioning, which, in comparison to the home country, migrants find more humane. Sarah Dickerson and Caglar Ozden (2018) discuss that since the experience migrants undergo abroad may be of a political nature, their inclination to promote "Western social norms on democratisation, freedom and equality" (p. 215) in their home country often increases. Simone Bertoli and Francesca

Marchetta's (2015) 'social norm transfer' hypothesis asserts that in case migrants return, they bring with them social norms from the host country, which, according to Catia Batista and Pedro C. Vicente (2011), might translate into a heightened demand for improved governance.

Such processes were not unique to my Hungarian participants. Even if most of my Venezuelan informants fled Venezuela because of the oppressive regime, they often reported feeling shocked by the extreme form autocracy had taken over the years. This is how Isabel described her experience of temporarily relocating to Venezuela after 13 years in the UK:

> *I started feeling like in a prison in my country. [...] One time, they closed the border with Colombia, and they put some military there so that people wouldn't be able to cross to Colombia. And since I already had the idea that maybe I will return [to the UK], I wanted to cross the border to Colombia to pick up the [British] passport of my daughter. And this day, only those could cross the border who had a medical receipt to buy medicine. […] I travelled with my daughter who was 5-6 years old, and I got somebody who was going to help me so that they would let me cross. So everybody was there with receipts to show that they were going to buy medicine. I managed to join the queue; it was about 15 or 20 people. They held me there and somebody said now we can cross. […] We were all put in line and the military marched ahead with the guns, on foot. We were at the front of the line but as I was marching with my daughter, we kept falling behind because my daughter walked more slowly. But we all had to march in line and there was military here and military there... it felt like in a concentration camp. I was walking and when I saw the border, that of Colombia, the military turned around and returned. And I kept walking, and I thought, oh my God and I looked back at the military, and I thought that's my country, but I feel free in Colombia. Why do I feel free in Colombia? And it was the image of my daughter who is innocent and didn't understand anything of the situation and I was thinking I cannot possibly give this to this little girl.*

George Gmelch (1980) asks why so many migrants struggle to readjust to the reality into which they were once socialised and concludes that their expectations may be unrealistic as their negative memories might have faded. The core question, therefore,

is: is it migrants who change, is it the home country, or is it both? At this point, it is important to introduce two concepts: 'homesickness' and 'nostalgia'. According to Anouk Smeekes and Jolanda Jetten (2019), the difference between the two derives from a spatial versus temporal separation from one's home country. While homesickness is understood to emerge as a reaction to being removed spatially, nostalgia is a yearning for one's country as it was in a bygone past. I suggest that migrants are mostly oblivious to the difference: they perceive life at home as static and believe that by conquering the spatial distance, they can re-enter the place they once left behind to find people and circumstances unaltered.

There are aspects of the home country that are indeed possible to recover: the geography, the weather, most of the architecture and the language returnees can realistically aspire to find little changed. Other aspects might have undergone slight change, like the goods one finds in the shops or the traditions people engage in. Nonetheless, the political system and the way people act within the state's ideological framework is one aspect that might undergo rapid change and thus, take returnees by surprise – albeit one might argue that such changes occur along historical grooves and are thus not entirely unpredictable. Even if the system does not change, it might become more extreme, like it has in both Hungary's and Venezuela's cases over the one-and-a-half-decade period in which my informants' migration stories typically unfolded.

The difference between slow-changing and fast-changing aspects of the home country became apparent from Aranka's reflections on why she decided to reduce visits to Hungary:

> *Quite simply, I don't feel well. I spent my most beautiful years in Budapest. I used to love Budapest, but now this city is already foreign to me. I haven't*

> *lived there for so many years, and everything has changed completely. Often, I cannot even recognise where I am.* [She laughs.] *In parenthesis because, of course, I recognise the streets and buildings, but the atmosphere has changed. People's attitudes are different, the style of life is different, so it does not attract me anymore. Quite simply, Hungary does not attract me anymore. What I have already mentioned, people's attitudes, the stress, other people's hurting, hatred, quarrels, that repulses me. […] And this is unfortunately for political reasons.*

In her account, Aranka highlights the uncanny sensation of being able to recognise the city as the built environment, which allows her to navigate it with ease but still feeling foreign as the changed atmosphere bars her from the ability to identify with the place. For this, she blames politics. As Aranka explained to me, in the past, she often felt homesick, but after her most recent experiences, she had reconciled herself to the irrevocable loss of the place she once cherished. Aranka still returns for pragmatic reasons and to see her family, as do the majority of my Hungarian informants, but it is not an uplifting experience that soothes her 'identity crisis' as described by Cakmak (2021), but one that complicates it even further.

Claudio explained the tender feelings he has towards Venezuela in the following words: "*I don't know if it's such a good thing, really, missing things you don't have. But, at the same time, the good part about it is that when you finally go back, you go with even more desire. It's like when you're craving a really delicious dish. And the day you finally get to eat it, you enjoy it so much more than if you hadn't missed it or thought about it. […] I miss it in a way that fuels my desire to keep loving it.*" Notwithstanding, the inability to return to 'what once was' was affirmed by my Venezuelan participants who had recent encounters with the state. "*The Venezuela as I knew it is no longer there, it became a place of my memory*" – said many, with Romina elaborating in the following way: "*They [other Venezuelans] all miss Venezuela. But they miss a*

Venezuela that no longer exists. They miss the Venezuela from which they left. But this Venezuela is no longer there. You cannot find the same people or the same way of thinking." Stef Jansen (2009) describes a similar phenomenon amongst his participants: "Interestingly, the breaking point between desire for return and actual decision against return often came with their first visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina. 'Everything had changed', people told me, 'there was nothing left of what I remembered.' It was when they were confronted with actual post-war everyday practice in the place they had once called home, that they realised the time lag that now separated them from it." (p. 57).

As Anne White (2022) observes, social change in Eastern Europe has occurred at a remarkable pace. I would argue that rapid transformation is common in any context where a sudden and drastic regime shift has taken place, made particularly evident in states governed by autocratic regimes. The resulting abrupt transitions can make it difficult for returnees to re-anchor themselves through a sense of belonging, despite often maintaining strong transnational ties from abroad. I contend that when migrants return to their home countries in search of healing their homesickness, they are often confronted with the fact that it cannot be cured because what they feel is not homesickness, but nostalgia for how they experienced their home country before migration.

They sense a mismatch between the imaginary homeland and the physical home country and as such, return visits cannot fill the void they seek to sate. According to Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song (2019), return is not only a movement in space, but also a journey to a bygone past: with migrants thinking they are going back to something they know well, "images of the past are projected into future returns" (p. 241). Therefore –

they argue –, “anticipation of return to a socially and ethnically familiar (and similar) country of origin is the fundamental reason why diasporic returns are often quite ambivalent and fraught with tension” (p. 243). It is for this reason that King (2000) emphasises that, “there can be no return to the status quo ante” (p. 20) and that Stuart Hall (1990) concludes that diasporic subjects are unable to return.

As Miah (2022) asserts, “long-held memories of people and places are revisited and reconstructed through back-and-forth visits during migrants’ life-course” (p. 98). Thus, the ability to reinsert oneself into the place for which the longing is felt is critical to discerning what can be recovered from the object of longing. When studying Polish migrants, Justyna Bell and Marta Bivand Erdal (2015) observe that frequent returns made people understand that life had moved on and thus, even permanent return could not quench their longing. Conversely, based on his research with Turkish emigrants, Cakmak (2021) argues that those who came to the UK for political reasons to wait for home-country political tensions to subside and thus had limited opportunities for return visits had a more romantic view of their homeland. They saw it as a land taken away from them, which feeling made them unite under ‘the myth of return’ as a sacred desire of the diaspora (also in Safran, 1991; Cohen, 1996).

Cakmak (2021) suggests that diaspora groups unable to visit the home country show an inclination to overidealise what they will find at home despite access to sophisticated methods of communication, with expectations becoming detached from the country’s contemporary reality. As Cakmak concludes, what his informants aimed for was a “nostalgic version of their homeland or a utopian future where the political change they wished for has been achieved” (p. 2). My research also underlines that

telecommunication can only contribute to recognising what is recoverable from the object of desire to a certain extent. By being in daily contact with relatives and friends, Venezuelans were cognitively aware of the scarcity of resources and compatriots' struggle to afford nourishing meals. However, for most of them, the damage only sank in upon their return: after not seeing people for years, my informants recounted being shocked by how much weight they had lost, with the extra holes cut in their belts to keep clothes on emerging as a recurrent trope in my interviews.

Isabel, who left Venezuela in 2000 to study abroad had few opportunities to visit due to the high costs involved. Although she loved the UK, she was homesick for her family, 'mi gente' [my people], and everything her homeland represented. Therefore, after nearly a decade, she decided to repatriate. Despite the apprehension of her family and friends, she was convinced she was returning to the same place she had left from:

> *People told me, and I saw the news but as I have not lived it, I did not want to believe it... I just was not able to believe it... and I missed my family... I missed my people and all the other things, so I think I was not very conscious, no. […] [Upon my return] I could not understand anything. I did not see very clearly what was coming. So, I would say no, I did not know what a different country I was returning to, I was very innocent.*

As Allan Williams *et al.* (2000) assert, amongst certain groups, the 'myth of return' traditionally closely associated with the diaspora experience becomes redundant as it is replaced by 'episodic holidays that play out an illusion of return' (in Cakmak 2021, p. 4). Hungarians were able to shift their focus from Hungary to the UK precisely because of return visits. Firstly, it let them fulfil obligations and allowed them to upkeep social ties, provide care, and benefit from the country's resources in a utilitarian way. Secondly, it forced them to confront new realities, often eroding hope for regime change due to Fidesz narratives reshaping public consciousness.

Conversely, due to the infrequent personal contact with the home country, Venezuelans believed that their homesickness could be cured through permanent return once the regime had been overthrown and economic and political concerns alleviated in the process. Therefore, a conviction commonly held was that the crisis only needed to be 'waited out' outside the country before mass return could ensue. Driven by this faith, Venezuelans sustained a life directed at Venezuela, maintaining connectedness through remittances, gifts, and daily contact and did what they could to contribute to speeding up the country's recovery, thereby preparing the pre-conditions for their permanent return.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how return visit patterns exert an influence on migrants' connectedness to their home country. Amongst Hungarians, return visits were an integral part of the migrant experience, with people benefitting from the ease of crossing European borders to avail of services, access goods, sustain relationships, and provide care, which lends to an interpretation of the mobility undertaken as people assembling their livelihoods across borders. As frequent contact allowed my informants to fulfil both practical duties and satisfy emotional needs, return visits often rendered permanent return redundant. Conversely, due to the difficulty of undertaking visits amongst Venezuelans, if return visits occurred, they were often practised in a pilgrimage-like fashion, seen as a spiritual revival. Venezuelans affirmed their identity and enjoyed the physical proximity of personal relationships previously nourished through remittances.

However, as trips could not be repeated often, the void left by them went on to constitute a constant source of yearning.

The concepts of ‘homesickness’ and ‘nostalgia’ were useful to make sense of the divergent connectedness that return visits engendered. I argued that return visits shifted perceptions of the country of origin: absence pushed migrants to view it as the homeland, the projection of an emotionally laden idea of home onto a physical territory, while physical presence redefined it as the home country, an administrative unit whose perception is rooted in tangible criteria embracing both positive and negative characteristics – conditional to migrants’ evaluation. In this equation, the home state emerges as a crucial player as it has the power to shape the perceived similarity between the two.

Both groups missed their home countries to a certain extent, a feeling that they initially identified as homesickness. However, the affective impact of return was often significant as my informants found themselves growingly repulsed by autocracy’s rise and the deterioration of conditions, prompting a sense of estrangement to accompany visits. Through frequent trips home, Hungarians confronted the reality that certain aspects of the home country were not recoverable, which made them redirect their focus towards their lives in London and acknowledge their feelings as nostalgia. As frequent re-encounters with the home country were not possible for Venezuelans, they remained governed by the nostalgic ‘myth of the homeland’, united in the conviction that the imagined homeland could be recovered. This kept Venezuelans invested in their home country’s affairs and propelled diaspora activism, underlining a strong correlation between the absence of return visits and a homewards orientation.

Chapter 7 – The future

Introduction

‘A peculiar form of dementia’ is how Flavia described her mother’s condition. As I explained in Chapter 2, Flavia’s mother fled Franco’s regime as a young adult and settled down in Venezuela, where she married and built a home. Her attachment to her adoptive country grew so strong that when Flavia asked her to reactivate her Spanish citizenship, hoping to secure a European passport for herself and her son, she refused, insisting that Venezuela was her chosen patria, while Spain was merely assigned to her randomly. However, as Venezuela’s crisis deepened, Flavia’s father also made the painful decision to leave, taking his wife with him. According to Flavia, her mother never forgave him for separating her from her beloved country: in her lucid moments, she would remember Venezuela as it was at its golden age, and upon realising she had been removed from it, would fly into fits of rage, refusing to accept what had become of the country.

Flavia used her mother’s condition as a metaphor for what she saw as Venezuelans’ deep affection for Venezuela despite the adversity endured. Her anecdote stayed with me throughout my fieldwork, as I began noticing this ‘peculiar form of dementia’ surface amongst my participants. In the same interview, Venezuelans would describe the inhumane conditions that forced them to leave, yet speak of Venezuela in superlative terms, often hinting at the possibility of forgiveness. Though often tentative rather than resolute, the orientation appeared central to the emotional and cognitive landscape of the Venezuelan community and stood in sharp contrast with my Hungarian participants, who expressed a more rigid stance, oscillating between indignation and

resentment. If Venezuelans' attachment stemmed from selective memory, Hungarians displayed an obsessive hostility marked by hyper-alertness to manifestations of the state in their lives. The divergence was striking given that Hungarians often left from amongst more favourable conditions and that the Hungarian government has consistently encouraged return, backing it with attractive incentives.

This chapter explores the emotional contours of political experience, focusing on how emotion underlies migrants' construction of the future and imaginaries of return. In anthropological literature, affect is often distinguished from emotion: affect is considered a more primal, pre-conscious response to stimuli, which refers to the immediate bodily, or physiological experience before cognitively labelled or processed as an emotion. As a "liminal space between the individual and the social" (Zembylas, 2012, p. 167), affect also reveals cognitive and motivational experiences that "are not only shaped by, but also shape, the relationship in which they occur" (Boiger and Mesquita, 2012, pp. 221-2). Affect underpins the formation of collective emotion, shaping how migrants interpret their relationship to the home country. Examining migrants' consequently evolving emotional condition helps illuminate how migration-induced feelings, such as fear, resentment, or hope, are transformed into social practices and mobilised as political resources, potentially leading to the institutionalization of those sentiments (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015).

I argue that both Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants' affective journeys start with anger, a pre-discursive, visceral response to a perceived rupture between the state and its citizens, which often motivates departure. The anthropology of the social contract (e.g. Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson, 2022) offers a useful lens here, allowing us to shift to a

relational, emotional, and embodied understanding of how people experience political life. After all, it is not only laws that legitimate a regime but also how the state makes people feel. Sophie Andreetta *et al.* (2022) critique the idea that state-citizen relations are rooted in shared rational agreement, proposing instead that they are held together by shared emotional investment. Indeed, affective frameworks like populism underscore emotion's capacity to govern. The first section of this chapter explores the affective landscape that shaped my participants' decisions to leave. While migratory considerations are unusual to discuss in the final chapter, thinking about return is inseparable from the affective milieu that shaped departure and therefore, must be analysed side-by-side.

In the second and third sections, I argue that once my participants acknowledge the initial visceral anger, it becomes strategically mobilised as a semi-cognitive emotion. Rooted in an imagined relationship with the state, my participants cultivate emotional stances shaped as much by past experiences as imagined future connections. Among Hungarians, anger solidifies into grudge, which functions as a coping mechanism to signal 'unengageability' (Papp, Kovács, and Kovács, 2025) – the refusal to assume diaspora subjectivity as prescribed by the state – in response to the state's persistent attempts to re-engage emigrants. Conversely, Venezuelans often rework anger into an openness towards forgiveness – not as guaranteed, but as an ongoing negotiation. Forgiveness emerges from a desire to return and reclaim Venezuela, in which context, the emotion serves to empower the emigrant community to move beyond the role of passive victims of unforgiveable deeds and renders them active agents in restoring a future for themselves and their country.

Underlying these emotional stances is hope, understood here as 'the past projected onto the future', as shaped by narratives of the national self. For Venezuelans – once citizens of the region's most prosperous nation – hope is sustained through memories of past abundance and the promise of future wealth embedded in the country's resources. Moreover, Venezuelans' struggle to invest hope in the UK emotionally reorients them towards the homeland. By contrast, Hungarians tend to lack national narratives of prosperity and struggle to envision a bright future for Hungary. For them, hope is projected onto the UK, with the Hungarian state's return initiatives seen as obstacles to a thriving life abroad.

In this chapter, I illustrate that forgiveness and grudge are not objective evaluations of home country conditions, but orientations towards imagined futures and as such, tools of paving a path towards the desired outcome. Rather than predating decisions to stay in the UK or return, they are often propelled by such intentions. I contend that forgiveness and grudge, while seemingly contradictory emotional stances, are instruments of the same strife: of migrants negotiating their connectedness vis-à-vis the home country within the restrictive structures it offers. In their collectively cultivated forms, they serve as mechanisms for social and political healing and can be understood as subtle but significant avenues of resistance.

Broken social contract

Many of my informants across both groups described their decision to migrate as stemming from a rupture with the state and labelled themselves as 'political migrants'. By this, they typically did not mean being opposed the ruling party's orientation

towards left or right but referred to a broader disillusionment with the autocratisation of their home states, where the guaranteeing of citizens' rights, well-being, and democratic freedoms was no longer prioritised, and the curtailing of fundamental aspects of a liberal state became the norm. When describing the process, several participants spoke of their conviction that an implicit 'contract' had been broken that they imagined between themselves and the state. While they felt that they had fulfilled their obligations by working and paying taxes, reciprocity was not guaranteed, with some of their most basic needs left unmet.

Social contract theory, rooted in moral and political philosophy, examines the legitimacy of state authority over individuals (Norkūnaitė, 2023). It conceptualises political life as an agreement amongst rational and autonomous actors (Boucher and Kelly, 1994), which establishes reciprocal rights and duties between the state and its citizens (Lessnoff, 1990). Contractarians like John Locke (2022) argue that state legitimacy and popular consent depend on the state serving the public good (in Norkūnaitė, 2023). Framing social contract as "a set of expectations and assumptions about how state-society relations should be, and a discursive and conceptual framework through which people interpret their lived experiences as meeting or failing to meet those standards" (pp. 223-4), Gwen Burnyeat and Miranda Sheild Johansson (2022) pioneer the 'Anthropology of social contract', a conceptual lens to study how individuals and governments understand and negotiate state-society relations. Their approach shifts attention from what a social contract 'ought to be' to how its idea operates in society as a dynamic tool that shapes political behaviour, with Burnyeat (2022) further highlighting the role emotional processes play in mediating how citizens internalise state messaging.

Even when understood as ‘implicit’ (Loewe, Zintl, and Houdret, 2021), social contracts can be broken. As Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson (2022) note, in the 21st century, the “breakdown of social contracts” (p. 223) is widely perceived as a pressing issue, inviting anthropologists to explore how everyday experiences lead citizens to believe the contract has been breached. I begin this chapter by presenting some of my informants’ recollections of their respective home countries which they interpreted as evidence of the state failing to fulfil its part of the deal. These accounts are presented in pairs to highlight recurring patterns characteristic of autocratic systems, but without the intention to imply any similarity in scale or severity between the two contexts.

When I sit down to interview Romina, a retired librarian from a middle-class family, she brings out a plate of olives and chorizo for us to snack on. The sight of the items still moves her emotionally because during her final years in Venezuela, she thought she might never be able to eat them again. Amid the severe hyperinflation, people’s money was losing its value rapidly. To illustrate the pace of the economic collapse, another informant recounted how her friend’s catering business went bankrupt: she would provide quotes, but by the time clients paid, the money requested was worthless. Simultaneously, the minimum wage dropped to around 130 bolívars – equivalent to $3.50 at the official rate – an amount that remains unchanged as of 2025 (Venezuelanalysis, 2025). At first, Romina tried to give up certain items to save money, but soon, her monthly salary would only buy her a bag of rice. Meanwhile, frequent power outages forced her to move her kitchen to the backyard and make her husband’s morning coffee over a campfire.

As a sufferer of a rare disease, Romina told me that all her contacts with the same condition who remained in Venezuela had died since. Even if they had been able to afford medication, the country's severe medical shortage rendered them unavailable. Though deeply attached to Venezuela, her slim chances of survival in the country led her to reflect on her belonging in the following way: *"I don't belong here. I belong to my home. But I cannot return. […] I would die before it changes. But it is really sad to die of pain. I don't want that death. So I don't belong there either."* After telling me about the various factors that shaped her decision, Romina found it crucial to emphasise that despite seemingly fleeing economic hardship, her family was in fact pushed out by an autocratic regime that is responsible for the country's collapse.

Barbara expressed a similar sentiment about Hungary, emphasising that despite working hard, making ends meet was impossible: *"Hard. Full of financial problems. […] I was always behind financially, it was always like how are we going to pay those bills while the burden of debts on my car and my home was really heavy on me. [...] It was really hopeless, a dead-end situation."* Before emigrating, she juggled multiple roles – teacher and musician by day, bartender by night. While she initially labelled her departure as a search for a more uplifting environment – echoing the 'deteriorating mood' that Boldizsár Nagy (2015) identifies as a dominant push factor in Hungary – she later shared that she understood economic hardship as a deliberate strategy of the Hungarian state to exert control, interpreting her problem as politically constituted.

Graciela emphasised a different aspect of the crisis: safety. In Venezuela, economic collapse sparked a surge in crime, which led the country to record the world's second-

highest homicide rate in 2014 (El País, 2014). She described the emotionally and mentally taxing experience of living in a country plagued by violence:

> *There were a lot of robberies amongst neighbours. They robbed me as well. There were many horrible stories of what had happened. And I was alone. […] It was very dangerous to go out. For example, I would go to the house of my sister, which was close, but it was the panic that going out gave me, getting in a small minibus, then the Metrobus because at any step of the way, something could happen. So, I was going thinking, if something happens here, I remember that my neighbour works up this street, so I get off and go running up to take shelter there… it was a state of panic*.

While safety concerns were less pronounced amongst Hungarians, Zsanett felt that the declining living standard increased the vulnerability of certain groups: *"The safety, I did not feel safe at home as a woman. For me, it was a constant dread in Budapest, I was living in the suburbs, to go back home at night... not only at night by the way. The homeless people, the harassment in the street, the money collecting harassment, harassment about me being a woman."* Zsanett attributed these changing conditions to political deterioration, which prompted her to compare herself to a refugee: *"Terrible. Terrible. A feeling that you have to flee. A political and economic refugee... that's how I feel about myself. The general mood, safety, the perception of Hungary on the international level... […] Quite literally, I was fleeing."*

Leandro and Adorján both left their respective countries after receiving threats linked to their political activism. In Caracas, Leandro worked for an anti-government news outlet, covering protests for foreign media, as well as a playwright, participating in a theatre group with a political focus. Adorján, an opposition member in Hungary, wrote provocative political commentary to spark debate. Although both men operated within legal boundaries, their activities increasingly attracted scrutiny from the ruling party and its supporters. Leandro's breaking point came when he displayed a banner expressing

dissent at the opening of a Chavista theatre festival, as a consequence of which enraged attendees chased him into a dark alleyway, where he narrowly escaped being lynched.

Adorján's confrontation was more subtle but equally traumatic. In a commentary on the 2020 Polish elections, he argued that, similarly to Hungary, *"it was the elderly, uneducated, village-dwellers that voted for them."* Criticising the fairness of the system, he cited climate change as an example: *"An elderly person who does not have that much time left might think that they can feel free to burn oil. That is unfair towards a young person who still has a lot of time left and will live to see the damage."* He provocatively suggested that grandparents concerned for their grandchildren's future might want to consider abstaining from voting. The backlash was intense: *"I received a lot of death threats, I checked, I had to block 1,700 people who, instead of saying they do not agree, threatened me or wrote me some obscenity. […] It really took a toll on me emotionally."* Both Leandro and Adorján left their countries feeling fearful and disillusioned, perceiving no space for democratic debate.

Monique Nuijten (2004) describes the state as a "hope-generating machine" (p. 211), suggesting that the hope invested in it helps unify its otherwise fragmented practices. This links hope with statecraft, offering a useful lens to understand the gap between people's expectations that the state will 'protect, provide, and care', and the disenchantment experienced when it appears distant or fails to deliver (Jansen, 2008). As highlighted by the vignettes, political and economic aspects of life are deeply intertwined and rarely experienced in isolation. The concept of 'voting with their feet' (Somin, 2011; Meardi, 2012; Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014) captures how dissatisfaction with home-country conditions underpins decisions to leave. As Anna

Triandafyllidou and Ruby Gropas (2014) emphasise, frustration often stems from the entanglement of enduring economic hardship and political grievances.

I argue that high expectations regarding the state's commitment to ensure citizens' stability – as well as the disillusionment resulting from unmet hopes – are particularly characteristic of those who lived under socialism, where trust in the state was embedded in the system. As Frances Pine (2014) notes, "under socialism [citizens] lived in a relatively calm, secure, and settled world where the future had been, or had seemed to be, certain" (p. 96). Consequently, the rupture of the social contract may have been felt more acutely by participants who experienced Hungary's transition or witnessed the erosion of socialist ideals in Venezuela.

For Andrea, it was a profound shock that her entry into the workforce coincided with the political and economic transition – in which context, she felt that the state had ceased to care about her:

> *I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher, and I picked History, with which I needed to choose a language. I could only choose Russian as my English was not good enough. I started university in '86. […] We had an exchange of 4 months in Leningrad during my third year that we dreaded but it actually went quite well. But when we got back, I felt as if the carpet had been pulled from under my feet. That was the beginning of 1989. The whole country had changed or at least it felt like that. In those 4 months, so much had happened! It suddenly felt hard to relate to the country again. It was obvious that the turnover was in progress and that my degree was going to lose its value overnight because of the Russian part. […] I always thought that everybody is responsible for their own destiny, but at that moment suddenly, I felt resentment... it felt like whether I existed, or I didn't doesn't really matter for the state. […] I thought that if I had invested this much energy then I would like to be reciprocated for it. And what I got was: hahaha, forget about it!*

For Andrea, the breach of the social contract was marked by the state's abandonment of socialist principles – and more specifically, its role in guaranteeing employment and, by

extension, basic economic security. This raises an important question: what underpinned Andrea's expectation that the state was obliged to provide her with a livelihood? Such expectations align more closely with the welfare state model, but contrast sharply with capitalist ideology, which emphasises individual responsibility and market-driven outcomes. Raised during socialism, Andrea's understanding of the social contract was rooted in the logic of 'you owe the state and the state owes you' as well as principles like complying with less consumerism in exchange for social benefits. Yet, with Hungary's shift towards the right, this framework was rendered obsolete, and what once seemed a reasonable expectation suddenly became a naive belief.

I argue that it is precisely because of ideals connected to socialism that the most frequently cited manifestation of a 'broken social contract' among my Hungarian participants was a statement by Ferenc Gyurcsány, Prime Minister of Hungary from 2004 to 2009 under the Hungarian Socialist Party. Gyurcsány famously declared that "If people are not happy here, they can feel free to leave." My participants interpreted this statement as the Hungarian state explicitly rejecting its responsibility to provide acceptable conditions, instead proposing an ultimatum: either leave or remain silent about grievances. This raises the question whether social contracts can truly be exited – and if so, whether migration is one form of withdrawal.

Locke (2022) argued that those who reject the rules of a society may leave and thereby revoke their consent to be governed. However, Dave Cook's (2022) research on digital nomads complicates this assertion. While his informants' departure was often meant to express a political stance, they found it difficult to fully opt out, remaining entangled in their home countries' bureaucratic and legal systems even from abroad. In the case of a

perceived broken contract, an alternative to exit is attempting to transform the system from within. Several analysts (e.g. Addison and Murshed, 2001; Azam and Mesnard, 2003) argue that the breach of the social contract frequently underlies episodes of social unrest and for Locke (2022), rupture can even justify revolution.

It was the debut of 'Niños de Las Brisas' [Children of Las Brisas], and the tiny art cinema filled to the brim. As explained in Chapter 5, the filmmakers had not anticipated the dramatic turn their project would take: what began as a documentary about El Sistema – a Chávez-led initiative to empower underprivileged youth through music – evolved into a powerful account of the disintegration of those very dreams, as Venezuela's political and economic collapse engulfed the program and its beneficiaries. In the process, the crew became part of the story: their critical portrayal of the regime turned them into political targets and ultimately pushed them into exile. As the director explained, *"The destiny of these kids portrays the destiny of their generation because there was a moment in the country when you could only have these three options: you confront the government and you go to protest and you say what you think and then you know, you are retaliated, or you leave the country or you in a way join the government."*

I was struck by the movie's parallels with 'Ecc-Pecc' [Ecc-Pecc][9], a Hungarian film from 2021, which we watched during an informal screening at Pannónika. The movie, which follows the upheaval within a theatre group after the appointment of a new director, serves as a clear metaphor for life under autocratic rule. Corruption, nepotism, and arbitrary dismissals mirror the oppressive dynamics unfolding in Hungary, which

[9] The English translation is unchanged. The word pair 'ecc-pecc' comes from a nursery rhyme used for counting while pointing at people to select someone at random as the 'winner'.

make life miserable for those not aligned with the leadership. In the movie, characters either endure the injustices, switch allegiances, or resign – reflecting the limited options available to many Hungarians under Orbán's regime.

The three options illustrated by the films echo Albert O. Hirschman's (1970) theory of 'exit, voice, and loyalty'. According to Hirschman, when individuals become disillusioned with the leadership, there are three options open to them: they can speak out (voice), leave (exit), or remain committed despite their dissatisfaction (loyalty). As he notes, "deterioration generates the pressure of discontent, which will be channelled into voice or exit; the more pressure escapes through exit, the less is available to foment voice" (in Dzenovska, 2018, p. 17). Loyalty, meanwhile, functions as a moderating force that may keep individuals from acting, even in the face of significant decline.

Beyond recognising these as viable options while in the home country, I suggest that considerations around return also map onto Hirschman's categories. Much of this dissertation has focused on homeward orientation and transnational engagement, which are fluid categories, often characterised by ambivalence and indecision. However, when it comes to physical return, the choices become more binary and constrained, as placing one's body into a specific location requires a certain degree of commitment. I conceptualise return options as analogous to Hirschman's triad: staying in the UK corresponds to 'exit', returning as a non-state-affiliated subject to 'voice' and returning as a state-affiliated subject to 'loyalty'. While the first is fairly straightforward, the latter two warrant further explanation. Returning as a state-affiliated subject means repatriating on the state's terms, whether by participating in an official return programme or by aligning one's return with the state's agenda. In contrast, returning as

a non-state-affiliated subject signifies a return in contestation of the state, either bearing quiet resentment, or explicitly aiming to challenge the prevailing order. These conceptual categories frame the next two sections, in which I analyse how my participants were thinking about the future.

Grudge, an emotional orientation amongst Hungarians

I first met Zsanett at the Hungarian Book Club at Pannónika. Her deep appreciation for Hungarian culture and enthusiasm for connecting with fellow nationals was immediately obvious, with many of her activities focused on navigating the emotional toll of leaving Hungary. As a Psychology graduate, she emphasised the importance of mourning not only people, but also symbolic losses, such as one's bond with their home country. Still, nearly a decade after leaving, Zsanett's reflections remained anchored in anger:

> *Resentment is not a good word. Trauma is what I feel. A gigantic trauma. [...] I am taken over by a feeling that my country expelled me from my home. And this causes such an anguish that will always stay with me. It is a disappointment that I cannot live my life in the country where I was born. [...] It's a big hole inside of me that there is no liveable standard of living for me in the country where I was born. Resentment multiplied by a thousand.*

However, after her raging emotions, her voice suddenly softened when the conversation turned to her adoptive country:

> *We were living in Richmond at the time [of Brexit], which is one of the best, if not the very best area of London and one day we received a letter from the Council which said that we are sending this letter to all EU citizens who live with us in the borough and we just wanted to say that we acknowledge and appreciate that you are here, you constitute a crucial part of – tears are*

> *genuinely coming to my eyes – I even have a photo of it that they said it exactly like this: 'We want you to stay.' And you know why I was crying and why I shared it on Facebook? Because when do I ever receive a letter like that from my own country? That we thank you for your existence, for contributing to our economy and cultural diversity. From my own country I have never received something like this and never will.*

Beyond the contrast in her emotions, what struck me most about Zsanett's account was her apparent disregard of the Hungarian state's sustained efforts to frame emigrants as vital to the nation and actively incentivise their return. When large-scale Hungarian diaspora engagement started in 2010, similarly to other initiatives globally (Délano Alonso, 2018), its primary objective was to regain citizens, as outlined in the Diaspora Politics – Strategic Directions (2016) policy paper: "We have to dedicate increased attention to those having left Hungary recently. […] first of all, they have to become members of the given Hungarian diaspora organisations, but on the other hand, we have to reach out to them with programmes that tie them to Hungary. With this group, our principal aim is to achieve their return within a few years" (p. 25).

As Giulia Sinatti and Cindy Horst (2015) argue, underlying diaspora return programmes is the assumption that people belong to fixed locations and identify with others from those places. Reflecting a 'sedentary bias' (Bakewell, 2008), this approach treats emigration as undesirable, with a 'binary mobility bias' suggesting that return is inherently necessary as it restores the natural order disrupted by migration (Black and Koser, 1999). However, Hungarians who had their needs met through migration and thus offset their reasons for leaving were unlikely to accept the validity of such narratives. Moreover, with official discourses asserting that Hungarians will never thrive away from Hungary, migrants lost trust that their home state carried their best

interest at heart. As a result, Hungarian state-led return initiatives have faced stern rejection by first-generation Hungarian migrants (Herner-Kovács, 2020).

In the UK, the most noteworthy effort to incentivise return was the ‘Gyere Haza Fiatal’ [Come Back Home Young Person] scheme launched in 2015, intended to capitalise on half a decade of diaspora engagement. Targeting anxieties around the uncertainty facing Eastern Europeans due to the upcoming Brexit referendum, it offered to cover repatriation costs for those committing to permanent return. Despite what the name suggests, there was no age limit – invalidating the criticism made by Gábor Lados and Gábor Hegedűs (2016) that policies only address certain subsections of the population –, even if educated people at a biologically reproductive age were preferred. The package also promised guaranteed employment – though without specifying the nature of jobs – with over 2,000 returnee jobs designated. However, the initiative met with resistance, and with only 105 applications received during the first year, it was ultimately discontinued due to the lack of interest (444.hu, 2016).

Despite the programme’s failure, efforts to incentivise return remained relentless. A scheme with a similar name was launched to help returnees become entrepreneurs in Hungary. ‘Hazaváró Irodák’ [Awaiting Return Offices] were established to assist repatriates, and young people were regularly invited to networking events at the Embassy to connect with Hungary-based employers. More recently, the state has sought to attract young intellectuals by offering to refinance student debts incurred abroad (Daily News Hungary, 2024). In the opening speech of the ‘Future: Hungary’ conference, a full-day event focused on “mitigating brain drain and channelling human

capital back to the mother country" (website of the event), the Ambassador introduced the state's new approach in the following way:

> *When it comes to incentivising return, we have had to change our attitudes radically. We now acknowledge that pushing anybody to return was not the right approach and therefore, it failed. We have thus switched to a pull attitude and so what we offer now instead is providing information about what is available in Hungary, because we get the impression that people don't know all that is available. Our duty is to clear away obstacles in the process of return: on the one hand administrate ones, but on the other hand, also mental ones that are still holding people back.*

Nonetheless, efforts to entice Hungarians to return are perceived as a constant trigger button. In our interview, the representative of a state-sponsored programme designed to facilitate knowledge transfer between Hungary and Hungarians in the UK reflected on the lasting damage caused by the Gyere Haza Fiatal campaign. Launching in 2016, their programme's early years were completely overshadowed by the Gyere Haza 'ghost' due to the deep distrust that lingered. As she explained, anything associated with the Hungarian state was assumed to carry the hidden agenda of repatriation: *"We have worked to counterbalance how many Hungarians feel: that if they have left Hungary and do not want to return, they are traitors and they do not have a place amongst Hungarians anymore."*

For many Hungarians, such programmes failed to offer real solutions and the initial anger accompanying emigration persisted because forgiveness was deemed impossible without an 'apology'. As Zsanett explained, *"The problem is that they do not listen, so these programmes do not address why people left."* Several participants echoed a deep disconnect between what the state offers and what migrants would truly need. At the conference, one participant intervened: *"Will anybody address why we emigrated in the first place?"*, with another informant cautioning that failing this, all initiatives will be

founded on lies: *"Hungary is on the brink of economic collapse, Embassy spending has been frozen since October, yet we pour money into these schemes to paint a rosy picture of the future? Ridiculous!"*

According to these people, only earnest engagement with past grievances can lend credibility to return programmes – a view also echoed by migration scholars studying other groups. Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) claims that in countries like Mexico, Turkey, and India, outreach policies often fail to be taken seriously, as convincing emigrants of their sincerity is difficult after years of disregard. Similarly, Jesús Arencibia Lorenzo (2018) argues that the Cuban state's failure to apologise for historical injustices complicates the emotional and political dimensions of return for Cuban migrants. Dace Dzenovska (forthcoming) describes a related dynamic among her Latvian informants in the UK, who remain 'mad' at the state for breaching an 'imagined moral contract'.

Without an apology, Hungarian migrants relied on grudge as a coping mechanism to navigate the state's growing demands for return. A few weeks before Christmas, a festive market was held at the Pannónika, featuring a visit from St Nicholas to distribute sweets to children. However, when the Ambassador arrived with his own children, the mood notably shifted: conversations ended abruptly, people looked away, and a palpable air of discomfort filled the room. I was helping at the improvised bar when the Ambassador's wife came to buy a mug of mulled wine. It was normally my colleague who took the orders, so I waited as she fiddled with coffee filters, deliberately avoiding eye contact, even though it was clear who was standing in front of her. Feeling awkward, I asked if I could help. When it came to payment, she only

had a £5 note, and we had no change. She checked her purse and asked at another stall, but to no avail. I told her I would find her once we had change, but she waved off my offer, saying we could keep the 50p. As soon as she walked away, my colleague turned to me, furious: "*See? I immediately knew she was bad omen. Honestly, she does not have 50 pennies for charity when it all goes towards the activities of the Pannónika anyway? For Hungarians in the UK when her husband's job is to support us! You have got to be kidding me! I was like, now I will just wait to see how long it takes her to finally say she doesn't want the change, I wasn't going to offer her the drink any cheaper!*"

Although eight years passed between Gyere Haza Fiatal's brief operation and my fieldwork, the programme still provoked strong emotional reactions. Participants often referred to it using the word 'hazacsal' [to deceive someone into returning], likening it to a trap, for which reason hypervigilance had to be exercised. Collective resistance to the programme was apparent from the widespread circulation of mocking memes. One such meme depicts a group of young people in a Polski Fiat, a symbol of modest financial means. Styled after official state posters, the meme's caption, 'Gyere haza fiattal!' creates a pun by adding an extra 't' letter to the programme's name to change its meaning to 'Come back home with a Fiat'. The number plate reads FUS:H 103, a playfully distorted command to 'run towards H', with the letter 'H' evoking both Hungary and 'haza' [home]. The second meme, the creation of a participant, used colour-drained aesthetics and a picture of the Fiat he owned in Hungary to suggest that grim prospects awaited returnees.



Picture 15. The original logo of the Gyere Haza Fiatal Programme.

Pictures 16. and 17. Memes mocking the programme.

It was especially intriguing to experience how differently my participants responded to Hungary's return campaign compared to the UK's voluntary return scheme introduced during Brexit. The 'Get help to return home if you are a migrant in the UK' offered EU citizens £3,000 and a free ticket to aid repatriation, and as such, was similar in structure to the Gyere Haza programme. However, when I suggested a parallel, my participants reprimanded me, highlighting that the intent differed. While the British scheme was framed as a supportive measure, Hungary's proposition was described as a manipulative attempt benefitting the state.

Attila Papp Z., Eszter Kovács and András Kovács (2025) identify 79.4% of the global Hungarian emigrant population as 'unengageable', which means that they reject state-promoted diaspora subjectivity despite persistent outreach efforts. Transborder Hungarians were generally more welcoming of state involvement, but since return incentives held little relevance for them, they could not be relied on as examples. Instead, the return of second-generation migrants following the political turnover was emphasised as key to rebuilding the country. As discussed in Chapter 3, many Hungarians view the state as omnipresent and its outreach as a manifestation of control

threatening the autonomy migrants gained through migration. Michel Foucault's (1978) theorization of power as not merely imposed from above but operating embedded in everyday practices is useful here. Modern governance, he argues, works through the regulation of everyday behaviour. I argue that diaspora organisations, often reliant on state funding to sustain their activities, become sites of struggle. In this context, grudge serves as a boundary-marker that helps migrants navigate the state's intrusive presence while enabling selective engagement with the resources it offers. In this way, emotions emerged not only as private feelings but as a form of 'political currency' (Brannum and Campos, 2016) that accumulate and carry value to 'do political work'.

Nonetheless, I found a notable exception among younger participants who came to the UK for higher education. Having grown up in a context where mobility was a natural part of life, their move reflected an aspiration towards the UK as the perceived 'centre'. However, lacking firsthand experience with independent life in Hungary, they had no sense of a broken social contract, which enabled them to view the state as a facilitator of their goals. While they rarely imagined a future in Hungary, the absence of grudge allowed them to pragmatically engage with state-provided opportunities to advance their lives.

I was a frequent visitor at the career networking events held at the Hungarian Embassy, where employers from Hungary were matched with Hungarian students studying in the UK. At one such event, the opening speech was given by a girl in her late twenties who had landed her dream job through this platform. After approaching her to congratulate her success, she initially played along with the official narrative but then admitted that taking a job in Budapest had been a calculated move in order to secure long-term

employment in London. Knowing that the Hungarian office was small, she recognised the ease of stand out and gaining access to senior staff locally. Once she had proven her worth, she requested to be transferred to London – successfully using the detour to Hungary to a fast-track her career.

I met Blanka, another student, at the 'Future: Hungary' conference. For her, the state's push for return was irrelevant as she was contractually bound to repatriate as a recipient of a statal scholarship. The scheme offers generous support to young Hungarians admitted to one of the world's top 60 universities, in return for them returning to work in Hungary for the same number of years. It fits into a broader strategy of state-sponsored retention, with the 'Project Retour' previously facilitating job placements for returning youth, and a 2011 law obliging Hungarian graduates to work domestically for a period equal to their state-funded education (Lados and Hegedűs, 2016). Although critical of the regime, Blanka said the scholarship aligned with her goals, which she saw as largely contrasting with the general attitude of Hungarians: *"I don't want to have the attitude that if there is this or that [problem], that is already intolerable and means that we have to leave the country. I understand it, but my approach is that I would like to use my own tools in a clever way to be able to bring some value into society instead."*

Despite her plans to promote change in Hungary, Blanka bore a stigma associated with her scholarship:

> *I feel that many people hold a grudge towards Hungary, and obviously politics play a big role. A lot of students here won't go back and don't want to, which is totally valid, but it divides our community – how we think about Hungary and our futures in relation to it. Just recently, a friend told me about a meeting where people were complaining about the 'stupid* [name of the scholarship] *people'... The fact that we want to live or work at home, and that we got a fantastic scholarship for it evokes negative feelings in a lot of people.*

When I asked if the resistance was provoked by her return plans or by the scholarship's state affiliation, she clarified: *"Especially because the Hungarian state is behind it – and certain politicians appear around it – it really triggers antipathy. They just can't reconcile this with their principles."*

Amongst my Hungarian participants, return was typically viewed in neutral terms when decoupled from the state. While many considered it a step backward for themselves, there was no judgement attached to others' choice to repatriate as the decisiveness of personal factors was widely acknowledged. However, a key difference lay between what I termed **'**state-affiliated' and 'non-state-affiliated' return. What fuelled grudge was not return per se, but the state's persistent demand for it, which framed it as a one-size-fits-all solution, ignoring individual experiences and calls for systemic change. The key detail Blanka's peers overlooked was that her decision to return was not an endorsement of the state, but a strategic way to navigate its structures to challenge the status quo from the inside. By putting her grudge aside, she aligned the scholarship with her own ambitions: to create a Hungary that was radically different from the one she had left from.

Forgiveness, an emotional orientation amongst Venezuelans

It was Rafael's last day at Arepana. Having endured many of the same abusive measures of our employers, I could sense his relief – even if I knew that he had it much worse. Over several weeks, he was monitored via CCTV, and, at the end of the month, a portion of his salary was deducted for closing 10-15 minutes early on multiple occasions. Rafael explained that he always began cleaning at the same time and

sometimes finished early, by which point further sales were impossible. When his reasoning was refuted, he begged the management, stressing that as a recent migrant, even a few pounds could make a huge difference – but to no avail.

It was at the height of Rafael's bullying that we received an invitation to the annual employee outing. My Venezuelan colleagues laughed when they saw that it would be a paintball event, remarking that no activity could be more ironically Venezuelan. While Rafael initially declined the invitation as a form of protest, after a week of persuasion from our team, he finally agreed to attend. It was clear, though, that he came not for team building, but to express his anger. After we arrived, the paintball field soon turned into a surreal space reminiscent of street demonstrations in Venezuela, with my colleagues assigning the label of 'opposition' to themselves and 'Chavistas' to the competing team. The exploding paintballs scared me to death but someone near me exclaimed *"Awww, the sounds of home!"*, visibly comfortable. Rafael stood out with his determination: leading his team into battle, his reckless charge at the enemy reminded me of the front-page photo of a Venezuelan newspaper he showed me once, throwing a makeshift explosive at a group of Chavista police against a devastated street landscape.

The outing ended with a bump on our boss's forehead inflicted by a shot from Rafael, which turned him into the unsung hero of our team. Yet, his conclusion echoed the sentiment he shared when showing me the protest photo: *"It felt good, but in the end, I achieved nothing. You can't win when the enemy is that powerful."* It was the recognition of the parallels between two oppressive systems that ultimately led Rafael to resign. *"I made the decision that will let me preserve my dignity, just like when I left Venezuela."* – he explained. The same anger, frustration, and sense of injustice that

once prompted his departure now compelled him to sever ties with the business that had been his lifeline during his first months in London.

I was secretly pleased to be sharing Rafael's last shift. With a wink, I asked if he was glad to get rid of us. However, his response made the spatula drop from my hands as he embarked on a monologue about the workplace not being so bad after all, and our bosses being 'good guys'. *"I have already forgiven them. Depending on how my new job goes, I might actually come back."* I was struck by his pivoting emotions. He had just secured a promising position at an upscale Italian restaurant, so I wondered, bewildered, what could potentially explain his tender feelings toward the company that had mistreated him. Then, during the same shift, Rafael shared another piece of news: he had decided to use his time in the UK to prepare his return to Venezuela. His plan was to improve his English, save money, and learn the tricks of the hospitality trade so he could open his own Italian restaurant. *"If you earn enough,"* – he told me – *"you can live with the rest."* I was stunned: Rafael struck me as someone who held onto grudges, yet here he was, having reconciled both with his exploitative employers and the Venezuelan state.

As Rafael's story illustrates, similarly to Hungarians, many Venezuelans' affective trajectories began with anger – negative emotions cultivated in response to a broken social contract that upended lives. While some of my informants appeared trapped in this emotional state, others fluctuated between moments of reconciliation and lingering resentment. As Stef Jansen (2008) observes, the process of departure is riddled with contradictions: "distancing themselves from the state and evoking its hope-generating capacity (even if through resentment), people continually call it into existence and

constitute themselves as state subjects" (p. 59). Studying forgiveness thus necessitates examining the navigation of ambivalent emotions, which rarely follow a linear path but oscillate between "cynicism and hope, detachment and investment, rejection and appeal" (p. 59). As Jansen suggests, rather than foregrounding the coercive dimensions of state power, anthropology must account for the conflicted ways in which individuals continue to desire and appeal to the state even when oppressed or disillusioned – and thereby reproduce it.

The study of forgiveness raises several key questions: What does it entail? At whom is it directed? And is it, in fact, possible? Philosophers like Aurel Kolnai (1974) and Jacques Derrida (2001) have highlighted its paradoxical nature: it is aimed either at an unforgivable act, making it conceptually impossible, or a forgivable one, rendering it redundant. Among Venezuelans, forgiveness was not as overwhelmingly characteristic as grudge was among Hungarians. Yet, I argue that its recurrent manifestations cannot be overlooked: despite the general insistence that the state's actions were beyond forgiveness, many still contemplated its possibility, marking a clear contrast between Venezuelans' and Hungarians' emotional terrains.

Graciela viewed forgiveness as the only path forward. Interviews with Venezuelans revealed individuals enduring hardship in Venezuela and the emotionally taxing process of migration, only to receive diagnoses of cancer or other life-threatening illnesses in the UK. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) proposes an embodied understanding of suffering, arguing that the human body serves as a site where social violence and political neglect are expressed. For my participants, illness was not an isolated bodily complication, but a manifestation of the emotional journeys traversed. In Graciela's

case, prolonged trauma – including medical supply shortage – showed as a psychological disorder. As she explained, *"I was really scared of getting sick. I was very hypochondriac. So, you would tell me that you have a headache, and my head would start hurting too, I would feel like I had a cancer in my brain."* Upon arriving in the UK, she desperately sought medical help until a London-based charity highlighted the need to address the resentment she harboured.

In Venezuela, Graciela had an outlet for her anger: the demonstrations. As she recalled, *"Initially, they were really scary. I remember that there were friends of mine who went, but I didn't. I was cautious. […] Then, for some reason, I started going. I had to go. And the first time I went […] the energy that I felt there was so liberating. Feeling that everybody wanted the same. People were walking and shouting, moving the energy, bringing it out, saying what one thought."* However, protests in London failed to reproduce the same sense of release and left her resentment unresolved.

Graciela emphasised that despite grievances, both individual and national healing remained possible, but like her, people had to reassess their relationship with the state that caused their suffering: *"Resentment? Now I don't feel it. I just know that they are to blame.* [Laughs.] *I know that they are to blame but I have detached myself from this feeling that was causing me harm."* While she acknowledged the importance of remembering the past, she stressed that moving beyond negative emotions was a condition of moving on. She identified two distinct patterns among Venezuelans, *"People are either dying from anger or laugh about everything."* Graciela let go of her anger not because she found the state's actions forgivable, but because she chose to redeem herself.

For Alejandra, fostering an anger-free culture at VeneHelp was crucial, a mindset she described as the result of a difficult journey: *"When I came here to the UK, I discovered I had bowel cancer. And to me, it was very clear that the way I was managing the emotions towards Chávez, Chavism, politicians in general, was not healthy. So, at the time, I did have a lot of resentment. But, you know, as soon as I had this self-awareness of my emotional involvement in the health of my body, I said, I cannot be resentful. It's not an emotion that I want to have in my system."* In order to remain invested in Venezuela's future without destroying herself, she decided to replace anger with a constructive approach: *"I kept being politically active, but not anymore with anger. It was more like, 'How can we help Venezuela?'."* Just like Graciela, she relinquished anger not for the regime's sake, but for her own well-being and that of her community: she understood that anger blinds and limits and one cannot construct positive things with negative emotions. While I encountered no similar stories among Hungarians, my participant Rebeka, who worked as a medical translator for Hungarian migrants, was convinced that Hungarian migrants were equally susceptible to illnesses like cancer – which she labelled a 'migrant disease' – but agreed that similarly profound emotional reconciliation was absent amongst them.

In Chapter 5, I highlighted the strong resistance toward individuals affiliated with Chavism in the UK, grounded in the belief that outside Venezuela, people were free to adopt any ideology they chose. For example, despite his opposition stances, Miguel was initially ostracised by the community for the simple mention of his past career in the military on his Facebook profile. This contrasted sharply with the forgiveness extended towards certain Chavistas inside the country, who were seen as having no choice but to align with the system. Similar leniency was afforded to workers at the Venezuelan

Consulate, justified through similar arguments. I followed the protracted journey of the 'diplomatic suitcase' carrying people's passports, delayed for nearly two years and then sent to the wrong country. Despite the inconvenience caused, no resentment was directed at Consulate staff – a stark contrast to how Hungarians related to state representatives in the UK. A circulating legend even held that, at one point, Embassy workers stopped receiving payment from the Venezuelan state but continued working nonetheless – casting them as victims of the regime, similarly vulnerable to the average Venezuelan migrant.

Above, I introduced Leandro, the playwright who narrowly escaped death during the ominous theatre festival. Aware that he had to flee, he scraped together $100 in between his final salary, savings, and family help, then took a bus to the Colombian border, where he spent a large sum to bribe someone to secure the necessary exit stamps. Although Colombia had just introduced a special permit allowing Venezuelans to work, lacking contacts, Leandro only found work selling ice cream. Some days, he sold just one and feared punishment from his employer. To this day, he lives with PTSD. Yet, the subject of the first play he wrote and produced in the UK is forgiveness. Tackling the question of how to reckon with homicide committed under the order of an oppressive regime once the political system shifts, the play ponders whether granting forgiveness might be possible in contexts where one might deem it unthinkable. As Leandro explained, forgiveness is a precondition for collective healing, essential for Venezuelans to restore the rhythm of life that had long been disrupted.

Analysing forgiveness in the contexts of the Rwandan genocide, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the impact of war and imprisonment on the

Channel Islands during World War II, Sheila Bibb (2011) concludes that in each case, surviving the ordeal often required apparent cooperation with perpetrators. She argues that "ultimately forgiveness is not a driving force but rather a convenient label to give to the actions of people seeking to cope with a situation which is beyond their control, or to move beyond the circumstances in which they find themselves" (p. 1). For Venezuelans, forgiveness served to symbolically purge Venezuela of a regime known for unforgivable acts. As Graciela put it: "*The enemy was brutal, because it didn't have any morals… and how do you fight with somebody who does not have morals? […] with somebody who is cruel, who does not care?"* Granting forgiveness, then, becomes an act of humanising the enemy, redefining them not as evil but as a fallible human being, thereby diminishing their power to render them less threatening. In this sense, forgiveness is a tool of empowerment, a means of reclaiming control over a relationship defined by oppressive domination. Nonetheless, assessing the perpetrator in moral terms, as Graciela did, the one who forgives assumes moral superiority, with the very act of forgiving signalling the offence as real.

After recovering from my shock, I asked Rafael why he had chosen to forgive. He explained that he had come to realise that anger would only limit his possibilities, obstructing his future from unfolding in a positive way. While his resentment was inconsequential to our employers, it could hinder his ability to reach personal goals, particularly those concerning his mother. His ongoing source of woe was that, despite multiple degrees and an academic career in Venezuela, his mother was now working in elderly care in Spain. As discussed in Chapter 4, the aspiration to 'extract' family members plays a central role in Venezuelan migrants' lives. Although Rafael's mother had left Venezuela independently, her humiliating circumstances urged Rafael to bring

her to the UK. Aware that Brexit had complicated family reunification, he acknowledged the key role our employers could play in the process: *"I will likely need a guarantor, somebody that signs for her that they want to hire her. She could work in the central kitchen for these guys, but even if not, they know many other Venezuelans in good positions here who could help."*

Drawing a parallel between these processes and his experience in Venezuela, Rafael told me that sometimes survival required playing along with the system. His father's side of the family had refused to leave Venezuela, having built a relatively stable life with considerable assets. This stability, however, was contingent on his uncle's alignment with Chavistas – not out of conviction, but as a strategy of self-preservation to safeguard the family's material security. While Rafael did not endorse this choice, he acknowledged that the imperative to support one's family could override political commitments, and he did not rule out the possibility of making the same decision upon return, illustrating that state-affiliated return could be deemed acceptable if it served the purpose of protecting the self or family.

Rafael's approach immediately reminded me of the concept of 'diplomatic friendship' he had coined a few weeks prior. The marketplace where we worked often hosted 'food tours' – guided experiences that introduced visitors to cuisines from around the world. One tour guide was known to minimise costs wherever possible: despite already receiving a discount, he would request half-sized arepas or insist on limiting the number of fillings to further reduce prices. While most of us were frustrated by his behaviour, Rafael consistently accommodated his requests. When I once asked whether he did not find it irritating, he admitted that he did but explained that he was practising 'diplomatic

friendship', a strategy that placed the emphasis on maintaining ties rather than severing them, since one never knew when they might prove useful in the future.

Zeina Yousof (2010) argues that forgiveness is more prevalent in what she terms 'collectivist societies', where restoring relationships and maintaining communal cohesion take precedence over individual emotional needs. She understands grudge as a strategy that isolates and forgiveness as one that fosters group solidarity – even if I would add that uniting in opposition to the state can also promote cohesion. As such, amongst Venezuelans, repairing the nation's social fabric, particularly amid growing urgency to unite a globally dispersed population, often took priority.

Not everyone agreed with the logic of forgiveness. As Carmen attested: *"Venezuelans have a very short memory, and because of that, we repeat the same mistakes – we don't remember that there are things that simply cannot be forgiven."* Yet, shaped by a Catholic moral framework, a parallelly evolving narrative approached unforgivable deeds through the lens of collective blame. *"Chávez emerges from the Venezuelan mentality."* – explained Claudio. *"I feel no resentment. If I feel any, it is towards us, Venezuelans. The country has nothing to do with it, the blame is ours. When I say ours, I refer to the fact that it was us who – and I include myself in this for being Venezuelan – made the situation as it is today. Yes. We throw the blame on politicians, but the thing is that it is not the politicians who led to this but the people."* Liliana echoed this view: *"Chávez got elected for a reason and the reason […] was that a lot of people were ignored. […] Like my parents and all my parents' friends and that generation that were the ones that, you know, basically ignored a bunch of people because they were having a great time and the economy was flourishing, and they were doing really well. So, I*

think that we [need to] take responsibility and understand how we got to where we are."

Thinking in terms of collective blame heightened the imperative to forgive, positioning the self not only as the one offering forgiveness but also the one worthy of receiving it. Within this frame, Ignacio concluded that *"For a country to grow, it has to fall."*, normalising national crisis as a necessary precondition of collective learning. Thus, among those who believed change was possible, a dominant view emerged, which argued that the path forward required acknowledging past mistakes, treating them as opportunities for growth – a narrative strategy to accept the crisis and sustain hope for a brighter future.

Hope

On 22nd October 2023, Alejandra published a social media post with the caption *"As an emigrant, I have understood that my patria is the country to which I forgive everything, for which I never give up hope."* In the accompanying photo, she smiles alongside two prominent figures of the Venezuelan community: the owner of Mesa Criolla and a leading advocate for emigrant voting rights. The occasion was the opposition primary, where Venezuelans selected a candidate to run in the 2024 presidential elections. While Alejandra's post radiated optimism, marking a significant step in the diaspora's fight for political inclusion, I was struck by the sentiment of forgiveness as no tangible change had occurred, and previously, Alejandra herself had voiced doubts about the integrity of the approaching electoral process.

Alejandra's feelings represented a counterpoint to a different kind of hope portrayed in a Venezuelan short film I watched at a Latin American film festival early in my fieldwork. Titled 'Esperando a María' [Waiting for María], the film references Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', juxtaposing its existential void with the Venezuelan condition. The protagonists, two impoverished adolescent girls, spend their days scavenging for food while waiting for María in a 'dispirited state of absurdity', hoping that she might bring the long-awaited solution. The director, herself a migrant, described the idea behind reworking Beckett's work on FilmFreeway (n.d.) in the following words:

> *Written after the Second World War, people at the time were seeking the meaning of life. I directly felt connected to the story by my experience living in Venezuela. It is the story of nothing happening, waiting for a change that never comes. For the past decade, Venezuelans have seen their own country destroyed to pieces. […] Today, Venezuelans in and out of the country share a common feeling of desperation and nostalgia for a country that ceased to exist.*

The movie shows people who feel powerless in the face of processes unfolding in Venezuela but are unable to inflict change upon the country. Nonetheless, they sustain a passive form of hope by channelling their mental energies into imagining a brighter future. As many of my participants saw their emigration as temporary, they lived in a state of suspension, awaiting improved conditions for return. It is in this sense that Vincent Crapanzano (2003) describes hope as potentially paralysing: "one hopes – one waits" (p. 18). Similarly, in his study of Bosnian war refugees, Jansen (2008) notes that his informants "lived only to return" (p. 57), resulting in lives defined by suspension.

If the 2021 movie portrayed Venezuela at a standstill, 2023 brought a new wave of hope. After long years of passive 'paralysed' hope, the upcoming elections and the

inclusion of the diaspora as voters marked a shift towards active hope. Some scholars conceptualise hope as action: for Morten Axel Pedersen (2012), hope is 'work'; for Janine Hauer, Jonas Østergaard Nielsen, and Jörg Niewöhner (2018), it is 'practice'. In the process of the Venezuelan diaspora becoming active agents in negotiating relations with the home state, forgiveness became a key symbol of action. While Jansen (2021) cautions that "since hope is per definition disappointable, there can be no unambiguous causal relationship here between practices and fulfilment" (p. 7), Ana Alacovska (2018) stresses that the 'labour of hope' plays an essential role as therapy, network, and collective mobilisation.

R4V's film 'The Journey That Never Ends' (2023) opens with a Venezuelan lady staring out a bus window and uttering, *"Venezuela… when we were happy and didn't know it."*, a line that immediately rang familiar. I had heard it so many times that it almost felt like the slogan of Venezuelan emigrants' relations to their home country. Romina used the same sentence while showing me a painting in her living room: *"You see the turquoise water? It is really that colour. And the house in the picture… that is literally how far our house was from the sea."* With its dreamy scenery, the painting seemed out of place: its vivid colours sharply contrasted with the dull furniture of the rented home Romina's family occupied in an outer zone of London. Pine (2014) defines migration as both an enactment of faith in the future and a reaction to hopelessness in the present, highlighting that "the past contains the lessons we live by – the aspects of life that we want to maintain or to bring back if they have been lost" (p. 96). For Romina, hope was grounded in memory: she could envision a better future because she had once experienced it, with the painting acting as a visual anchor to a life once lived and still longed for.

Some of my most striking fieldwork moments involved hearing Venezuelans recount their hardships in Venezuela, only to moments later describe the country as paradise on Earth. Although such assertions were undoubtedly shaped by regime discourse, unlike accounts of socialist Hungary that crumbled upon external comparison, Venezuelans' idealised memories endured despite growing familiarity with countries encountered along migrants' trajectories. Venezuela's diverse natural beauty, along with its favourable climate, was seen to nurture people's body and soul – a source of vitality whose absence left them hollow. As Paolo Boccagni (2022) argues, "in a 'diasporic' sense […] homing involves a strive to reproduce emotional and sensorial connections with a home(land) grounded in the collective memories of the past" (p. 589). Even if, as argued in Chapter 6, Venezuelans' perceptions were largely shaped by nostalgia, Venezuela as a concrete, tangible place was central to their longing.

Venezuelans experienced the UK as more different qualitatively than Hungarians and often struggled to recreate its material and sensory rhythms. As discussed in Chapter 2, many participants felt barred from upward mobility and often expressed having experienced 'the West' more fully in Venezuela than in London. Venezuelans' identity rooted in Venezuela's status as Latin America's leading economy before Chávez remained particularly strong. A dominant memory rooted in this period, which Claudio referred to as the era of 'dame dos' [give me two], was often narrated: "*There was a boom. There was money, money was flowing in. Money would be gifted in Venezuela because everybody was earning so well, you could make money on anything. There was a saying in the 90s that Venezuelans would go to Miami and everything they would buy, they would say this is cheap, give me two! Give me another one because it's really cheap, isn't it? Imagine, with the money from*

Venezuela!" This era of prosperity fostered national pride and a sense of exceptionalism. Graciela recalled how, at university, the compassion felt for peers from Latin American dictatorships bolstered a sense of superiority for coming from the region's 'best' country. Such pride often translated into a belief that Venezuelans were a 'chosen nation favoured by God' reinforced by nationalist rhetoric surrounding Simón Bolívar, the redeemer of Latin America.

Romina's reality of making coffee over a campfire sharply contrasted with her pre-crisis life: *"We were a rich country. We lived… my husband changed cars every year. […] I felt ashamed to tell my friends that he changed, one car today, another one tomorrow. Sometimes he changed them the same year because he did not like the colour."* For Romina, the country's former prosperity underpinned Venezuelans' ongoing transnational action: *"Venezuelans feel a deep responsibility toward Venezuela. […] Because those who are here, but also my son… my sons got to know the good life. We cannot disconnect from that Venezuela that we once knew. […] Maybe I will not get to see it, but Venezuela will be free. Because Cuba did not have what we had,"* to which her husband added: *"Let's not lose hope, because Venezuela has the world's greatest [oil] reserve. And you won't find another oil rich country that is in crisis. Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, everybody who has oil are multimillionaires."*

Nature was not only a reason for optimism due to its beauty: Venezuela's oil wealth served as a powerful source of collective hope, grounded in the widespread conviction that history was reversible. Sherezade García Rangel (2025) emphasised Venezuelans' hope as rooted in 'potentiality': while people's most recent experience was of the expropriation of resources for the benefit of the regime, they believed that wealth was

‘there’, waiting to be enjoyed by people. As Ben Anderson and Jill Fenton (2008) highlight, hope is necessarily imbricated in different forms of power: “hopes are mobilised and modulated to continue relations of suffering and loss but also better ways of being” (p. 79). Lauren Berlant (2011) describes ‘cruel optimism’ as being attached to promises that no longer deliver yet emotionally bind people to broken systems. According to her, hope is often not a potential for recalibration, but an affective ‘stuckness’ in the past that keeps triggering thinking about ‘what could be’.

If grudge is about cutting ties, then forgiveness is about proximity. As Liliana explained, while it was clear that returnees would be excluded from meaningful roles, ‘passive hope’ eventually had to be replaced by concrete action, which was only possible from within: *“I know a lot of people that are going back as they say, who’s going to rebuild the country? And if we’re not doing it, literally, there’s nothing else to do. That’s one way to start, at least.”* As such, forgiveness represents a willingness to move forward and to try again even in the face of potential failure.

In a personal conversation with Tomás Páez (2022), President of the Observatory of the Venezuelan Diaspora, he told me that the majority of the 850 Venezuelan emigrants whom he surveyed around Europe did not want to return. However, I found that his statistic missed an important pretext: that willingness to return directly corresponded to people’s belief about whether a regime change was possible, with those who did living a life directed at return while those who did not turning their hope towards the UK similarly to Hungarians. The political economy of hope examines the conditions under which hope flourishes or falters (Jansen, 2021). Arjun Appadurai (2004) describes the ‘capacity to aspire’ as a cultural capacity that is unevenly distributed, shaped by

collective horizons and experiences of success and failure. I contend that the capacity to aspire differed amongst Hungarians and Venezuelans because of how experiences of the past were projected onto the future. Venezuelans juxtaposed a bleak present with a glorious past, while Hungarians perceived the present as part of an ongoing national stagnation or even decline.

As my interviews with Venezuelans frequently referenced a specific historic era, I became interested in when my Hungarian participants thought Hungary had been a great place to live. Most informants mentioned distant periods, such as the Middle Ages or the Reform Age, and instead of pride, responses attested to shame and victimhood. There was a prevailing sense that Hungary was doomed and irredeemable due to always being either 'on the wrong side' or under foreign domination. Shaped by disillusionment, often grounded in personal experiences of the failed promises of the democratic transition, the country was seen as heading toward a bleak future, as described by Lőrinc:

> Lőrinc: *"I resent Hungary for not turning out to be the country... because of my age, I was 13 when the turnover happened and everybody, the population, the country was full of optimism that finally the time has come that we will take things into our own hands. And I remember there were some views that democracy and well-being is the same and since democracy has erupted, in four years, we will be on the level of Austria. Yeah, sure. I am not sure if you have noticed, but this is not what happened. And yes, there was some resentment in me about how, despite all this, people can leave behind democracy and the country's leaning towards 'the West' so quickly for a demagogue impostor."*
>
> Me: *"And whose fault is it?"*
>
> Lőrinc: *"Not necessarily of the demagogue impostor, but it is a cultural question in Hungary. Hungary, is located between East and West, exactly where the problems start."*

Lőrinc viewed the failure of the democratic transition as determined by Hungary's geopolitical position, which was destined to pull the country down even during

moments of hope. Among Hungarians, there was a prevailing belief that political regimes are static and unchangeable by ordinary people and participants expressed little belief that Hungary's political situation would improve within the next decade. As a result, return was equated with subduing oneself to a political system one fundamentally disagreed with.

Hungarians' self-perception as historical 'losers' came to the fore at the 1848 revolution commemoration organised by InMpulse. Although I was determined to attend, the combination of a torrential downpour and a tube strike made reaching the meeting point beneath a plaque marking a national hero's permanence exceptionally difficult. When I finally arrived, I found a group of small figures huddled under umbrellas. *"How unfair of London transport not to respect our national day!"* – joked one person. *"So typical of Hungarians' luck"* – came the response. *"Apparently, the weather was just as bad on that fateful day in 1848 – some say the worst of the century"* – added another, implying a sense of cosmic antagonism toward Hungarians. The organiser noted that eight attendees, given the circumstances, exceeded his expectations and began his speech: *"Lajos Kossuth was a controversial figure. In Hungary, he organised a revolution, which failed. Then, he came to the UK, where he did not achieve anything either. He is a bit like us, with our [InMpulse's] political agendas: we did not achieve anything at home and not much more from outside the country either."* A quiet despair descended on the group, making us feel as if a persistent national doom made misfortune inevitable and hope constrained.

Suddenly, in an unexpected turn of events, the door of the house bearing the plaque swung open, and the Australian owner stepped outside with bottles of 'Tokaji'

[Hungarian wine] in his hands. I was told that five years earlier, he had watched the group from inside, curious about the gathering. Upon hearing the story behind the plaque, he began contributing to the annual commemoration with Hungarian alcohol. A well-travelled and sociable foreigner who had spent considerable time in Hungary, he said he would never miss a party: *"I never understood all this gloom. You're like the Irish – always fighting, but not quite sure what for, are you?"*. None of us tried to contradict him.

On the way home, Ödön turned to me: *"That was cool, right? I told you there'd be a surprise!"* He explained that when they first organised the event, they never expected it to become a tradition, but the Australian man, appearing each year with Hungarian wine, kept people returning. In light of his comment, I found myself wondering what truly drew people to the event: the need to remember the past in order to build a better future, or the presence of the foreigner who cheerfully shifted attention from the gloom and reminded us that our present pertained to the UK. After all, despite his key role with InMpulse, Ödön's own stance was clear: he would not return to Hungary unless the party achieved a major victory and he was offered a prestigious position. But to fight as part of a minor opposition? No, then he would rather stay.

"A Hungary I would move back to? I don't think Hungary would be able to change enough for me to move back." – was a common response when I asked participants what would need to change for them to consider return. Many dismissed the question outright, saying it was pointless to fantasise as Hungary was resistant to change. As María Hernández-Carretero (2017) argues, 'places' are often imagined as 'states': people assess the relative capacity of the institutions that govern people in particular

places to foster hope or, at least, to reduce hopelessness. Similarly, Jansen (2008) notes that people often attach their aspirations to specific locations. Hungarians, too, had hope – but it was directed at the UK. Their grudge was a manifestation of this hope: a deliberate rejection of persistent calls to return home, to enable a future abroad. I thus contend that it is important to distinguish between the directionality of migrant hope by delineating home-state-oriented and host-state-oriented hope. As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, Venezuelan migration is often driven by the goal of self-preservation until return becomes possible, with the host country only becoming a site of hope insofar as it enables accumulating resources to aid and eventually reclaim Venezuela. This contrasts with the Hungarian case, where hope was not projected onto the home country but at building a future in the UK.

Nonetheless, when Alejandra expressed willingness to forgive in her post, her feelings were not directed at Venezuela as it was at that given moment, but at Venezuela as it could potentially be. Similarly, Leandro's play is set after the regime's imagined fall, as people deliberate retribution. For Venezuelans, forgiveness was not a response to the current realities but imagined to be granted upon non-state-affiliated return, after the government had been removed from power. They felt empowered to entertain forgiveness because, due to their memories, they could imagine a different future. In contrast, Hungarians refrained from imaginary processes directed at Hungary, perceiving meaningful change as unlikely and thus, hoping as futile.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the emotional landscapes of politics. I focused on how emotions are both shaped by and shape migrants' sense of belonging and intentions to return. I argued that members of both groups tended to explain their migration with reference to a broken social contract with the home state, as regimes increasingly restricted liberal freedoms and the fulfilment of basic needs. Migrants did not experience this contract purely rationally but lived it emotionally, with emotions serving as orientations that structured how they came to relate to the state.

While the broken contract tended to evoke the visceral response of anger in both groups, emotional trajectories eventually diverged. Among Hungarians overwhelmed with the state's outreach, it solidified into grudge, an emotional resistance communicating 'unengageability' but allowing people to benefit from diaspora structures. Amongst Venezuelans, however, emotions shifted toward the possibility of forgiveness: not the reaffirmation of the contract but a form of resistance that nurtured the hope that a future in Venezuela remained possible – a process which upheld continuity in the face of adversity.

In both cases, emotions shaped in opposition to state narratives. The Hungarian state encouraged return but prompted emotional detachment, while the Venezuelan state distanced its emigrants, triggering some to reimagine belonging. Despite their differences, grudge and forgiveness shared functional similarities in the context of the highly restrictive structures offered by autocratic states: both enabled migrants to navigate the home state's claims on their place in the nation and create possibilities for political and emotional healing. These emotional practices were migrants' way to claim agency: by adopting them, they empowered themselves to shift emphasis towards

individual needs and aspirations, going from passive sufferers of the state's agendas to active agents reshaping their relationship with it.

Drawing on Hirschman's framework that I adapted for return, I argued that for Hungarians, 'exit' –remaining in the UK – remains the dominant orientation. While 'voice' might be pushed by certain circumstances, 'loyalty' is mostly only considered viable when framed as an opportunity to reform Hungary from within through alliance-building. In the Venezuelan case, however, despite what the logic of forgiveness might suggest, 'loyal' return is considered less of an option, as forgiveness is envisioned to follow regime change. These outcomes were not simply a matter of diaspora policy, but a result of 'hope as memory'. Boosted by memories of a prosperous Venezuela, for which the 'resource' preconditions still existed, Venezuelans projected the past onto the future, fostering hope oriented toward return. Conversely, Hungarians, unable to project their hope onto Hungary, attached it to the UK instead and used grudge strategically to facilitate a future in the country.

Conclusion

This dissertation explored the factors that shape homewards orientation amongst Hungarian and Venezuelan migrants in London, whether via state-based diaspora subjectivities or transnational non-state-based kin and personal networks. I relied on comparative ethnography of two migrant groups whose members left from two autocratic regimes – Hungary's nationalism and Venezuela's socialism to examine the ways in which the institutionalised political ideologies of sending states impacted how migrants stayed politically, economically, socially, and emotionally invested in their respective home countries across borders. I also looked at what kinds of transnational

lives emerged in the process of migrants (dis)engaging with their respective home countries.

My basic tenet was that while both the Hungarian and Venezuelan state exert influence across borders, the forms and aims of this impact diverge in important ways. Hungary pursues a form of transnational nation building by constructing a symbolic 'nation empire', to which it re-attaches migrants as essential members. In stark contrast, Venezuela, consistent with other socialist states, adopts a more exclusionary stance, treating outward migration with suspicion and often hinders the homewards involvement of those who left, especially 'westward'. My aim was to explore how these two frameworks shape diaspora subjectivities and how they interact with other factors that affect homewards orientation. Ultimately, I was interested in answering the question of how effective states are in governing across borders.

Before looking at how migrants operated in the system that was created, it was important to scrutinise the distinct approaches that two home states take. My most important analytical contribution to diaspora literature was the development of two concepts: 'ideological citizenship' and 'diaspora disengagement'. I defined ideological citizenship as a form of transnational engagement pursued by states, which, instead of economic contributions, seeks ideological adherence. I argued that within this framework, diaspora outreach is used to reinforce regime legitimacy by forging allies, regardless of legal citizenship status. States pursuing 'ideological citizenship' construct the nation as a transnational ideological community, bound together not by territory but by shared narratives.

To further nuance this tendency, I proposed the concept of ‘diaspora disengagement’. Diaspora disengagement calls attention to processes largely overlooked in literature, whereby states actively disincentivise or hinder certain subsections of the population from staying invested in the home country’s affairs. I relied on the term to highlight processes of selecting people principally based on ethnic criteria to engage or disengage. In the case of Venezuela, people of European ancestry, who were the ones that predominantly constituted the migrant population that arrived in the UK, were excluded in line with the state’s decolonial agenda, while in the case of Hungary, ethnic pertinence became an important organising element of the nation, which assigned a central role to transborder Hungarians.

Subsequently, I looked at how people operated within these statal frameworks. I found that principally, migrants from both contexts moved against state narratives. As migration was largely rooted in a perceived rupture in both groups that emerged from a perceived breach of the social contract by home states, relations were often characterised by affective repercussions of anger. If Hungarians engaged with the diaspora, it was largely out of utilitarian motives – with the notable exception of transborder Hungarians, who were the beating heart of diaspora communities –, while Venezuelans maintained strong affective and humanitarian ties to their homeland despite the manifold ways the state disincentivised such practices.

Focusing on the underlying motivations to cultivate homewards orientation or not, distinctive patterns emerged, often rooted in the realities experienced in the UK. Amongst Hungarian migrants, the ‘myth of the West’ was a central motivating factor, with Britain imagined not only as a place of economic opportunity but also of the liberal

modernity that Hungary failed to reach through its post-socialist transition. The relative ease of integration for white EU nationals – a welcome surprise for many hesitant to undertake migration due to fears emerging from the limitations imposed by both historical and contemporary Hungarian immigration and emigration regimes –, supported a strong and ongoing commitment towards the UK.

Conversely, although Venezuelans were initially reluctant to leave, once they did, they departed with high expectations, believing they would achieve the same level of growth as earlier migrant communities in Venezuela. However, the challenges of economic and social integration, compounded by racialisation, linguistic barriers, and legal hurdles, led many to reassess the ideological promises attached to both capitalism and socialism. Moreover, unlike Hungarian migrants, who availed of regular return visits and thereby confronted the reality of the home country, Venezuelans could not quench their longing for Venezuela as access to return trips was limited, which fed a nostalgic longing for the country. In the process, an idealised image of Venezuela as a 'paradise' came to be sustained and the 'myth of the homeland' was promoted by the belief that the latent potential embedded in the home country's resources could be key to recovering Venezuela's previous prosperity.

While these conditions, along with the need to contest the political processes unfolding in the home country, made both groups resist the kind of diaspora subjectivity assigned to them by the state, moral commitments towards kin and personal networks could overrule this pledge. Venezuelans were initially anchored in a homewards investedness by the presence of loved ones in the country. However, once their removal from Venezuela had been accomplished, many began to withdraw from diaspora structures.

Amongst Hungarians, state-affiliated diaspora events were viewed with apathy or distrust and often failed to attract broad interest, as they catered primarily to a narrow segment of the community, reproducing folk and transborder culture. The belief that after failing citizens, it was cynically attempting to re-engage emigrants for its own benefit cemented initial anger into perpetual grudge and made Hungarians refute the state's attempts to incentivise return. However, these dynamics shifted when the idea of having children started to surface. Concerns around cultural continuity and language transmission created a new openness toward certain forms of engagement, even if political resistance remained.

While I initially perceived the Venezuelan community as vibrant and perpetual and the Hungarian one as solely kept alive by the support of the state, I later sensed that such dynamics might slowly reorganise. Venezuelans often saw their migration as temporary, a means of 'waiting out the crisis'. This prompted them to stay invested, keep a sense of community alive, and prepare the rebuilding of the country from abroad. Nonetheless, as Venezuela's crisis deepened and the hope for political change faded, this commitment gradually eroded, and migrants' energy became redirected towards one of two strategies: cultivating a future in the UK or the ethos of return despite non-ideal circumstances. The hope generated by the ethos of return often triggered emotional reconciliation and, in some cases, even prompted contemplating the possibility of forgiveness towards the regime – even if this was usually imagined to be granted retrospectively, once the current government had been removed from power. I predict that while Venezuelan diaspora activity may wane in the light of Venezuela resistance to change, Hungarian diaspora engagement may continue to grow around families, perpetuating Fidesz's nation project into the future despite migrants' rejection of return.

While both groups desired a political shift in their home countries, diaspora structures remained largely apolitical, unless explicitly aligned with the dominant power. Political neutrality was commonly embraced in an effort to maintain cohesion amongst migrants, protect the community from potential repercussions, or to express disillusionment with politics altogether. I argued that apoliticism, while undoubtedly serving minor goals, may inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of existing regimes. Moreover, I illustrated that home state ideologies, beyond being an object of contestation for feeding autocratic systems, also provide deeply embedded meanings that structure migrant lives. Political ideologies shaped migration aspirations and visions of success, as well as coping strategies adopted when expectations were not met in the UK – concurrently constituting a ground for forging critique of the host country and society.

In conclusion, I contend that states are little efficient in governing across borders: in fact, the immediate results they achieved were contrary to their aims. Through migrant lives, the state's citizenship articulation was loosened and reassembled in various ways. Even if transnational conditions have strengthened the state's ability to shape lives, its capacity to control largely diminished through the distance that was created through migration, both in a physical and psychological sense. I argued that moral obligations cultivated in relation to kin and personal networks held more importance and as such, could even revert one's resolve to contest the state. Nevertheless, I also warn that states are successfully planting seeds for long-term change and the processes I documented might slowly revert in line with what the respective home states propose.

Methodologically, my study has illustrated the epistemological potential of comparing non-obvious cases. Comparison allowed me to understand both of my groups more

profoundly and enabled the development of a broader theoretical understanding of phenomena pertinent to diaspora that might have stayed hidden had I studied these communities in isolation. My project also opened a wide array of new comparative possibilities: with autocratic powers on the rise and countries adopting one another's 'best practices', it is important to understand if similar patterns emerge globally, not only in geographically adjacent places.

It is important to highlight, however, that some limitations arose from my project design. My positionality of being 'insider' in one group and 'outsider' in the other shaped how I was perceived as a researcher and what kinds of data became available to me ethnographically – as well as the expectations my informants attached to my output. Furthermore, the timing of my fieldwork, conducted in the aftermath of Brexit, meant that I could only access a specific subset of the migrant population: those who had already made a commitment towards staying in the UK. Many of the short-term, economically oriented migrants – especially amongst Hungarians – had left, narrowing the basis for comparison with diasporas in other host countries.

Beyond its academic contributions, this research also holds significant policy relevance. In a world scarred by the radicalisation of power and by ideologies justifying extreme actions, some of the tendencies documented in this dissertation may deepen and intensify, demanding attention in order to safeguard democracy. A better understanding of how autocratic regimes exert influence transnationally can help host countries protect the rights, safety, and well-being of migrant populations and support the design of responsive policies that consider lived experiences rather than just legal or economic frameworks. One of the strongest impressions of my fieldwork was the extent to which

migrants navigate emotional terrains when crossing physical borders. An obvious low-cost, high-impact intervention would be the provision of opportunities for migrants' collective reflection: after all, providing spaces for journeys to be heard is an important act of resistance in itself.

Afterword

I concluded my fieldwork in June 2023. Intending to get the airport bus to return to Hungary for a well-deserved holiday, I encountered a notice on the station's billboard announcing that the next three buses had been cancelled. The station attendant explained that while the buses were ready to leave, there were no drivers to drive them. The departure of migrant labour, once vital to sectors like transport, was beginning to be felt in post-Brexit Britain. Where had these workers gone? Were they returning to their home countries – in line with or in spite of their home states' invitation? Or were they seeking new destinations that offered better prospects? If so, in a world increasingly hostile to migration, where could the promise of a better life be found?

Much has changed since my time in the field. In Hungary, democratic backsliding has taken unprecedented forms. The establishment of the Sovereignty Protection Office, whose task is to investigate and penalise – amongst others – NGOs, media outlets, and foreign influence, represents a profound erosion of civil liberties. The government now routinely rules by decree. Pride Parades have been banned and participants prosecuted, in response to which some of my informants added the caption *"I do not feel homesick anymore."* to their social media profiles. Additionally, now the regime does not only mould the nation by abundantly distributing citizenship: a recent constitutional amendment allows the suspension of Hungarian citizenship for dual nationals from non-EEA countries, should they be deemed a threat to public order – a clear statement against people like Soros who represent a counterforce to Fidesz.

In Venezuela, a presidential election was held in July 2024. While, in a welcome turn of events, diaspora participation was allowed, it ultimately declared Nicolás Maduro as the

winner amid widespread allegations of electoral manipulation. Though I was no longer in the field, my Facebook feed filled with anti-regime testimonies by previous participants and showed a new wave of protests sweep across cities with significant Venezuelan migrant populations. Diaspora activity re-surged, in a way I never experienced it in 2022-23.

I felt a strong urge to return, to bear witness, to update my findings. I applied for a grant to spend a follow-up month in the field in April 2025. Was I naive to think I could achieve anything in such a short time? Perhaps. The field I returned to felt entirely transformed. My sense of disconnect ultimately impressed upon me the need to accept my dissertation for what it could realistically contain: a snapshot in time, bound by the parameters of a particular historical moment.

Yet, as Alphonse Karr famously noted in 1849, the more things change, the more they stay the same, and the world sees no end to power abuse by heads of states. While writing this dissertation, my initial fear was that my research could be used by the very governments I critiqued to refine their diaspora strategies. Nonetheless, I held onto the hope that the knowledge I gained could instead promote positive change. During my collaborative placement with IOM, an emergency meeting was called where staff were told to be ready for imminent dismissal due to funding cuts. That time, the team survived. But just weeks ago, a former colleague messaged me to say she was one of the only few remaining following massive firings due to the Trump administration.

Traditionally, diaspora engagement was the domain of developing countries that aimed to leverage their emigrant populations for remittances and other benefits. Today, developed countries are also growingly recognising migrants' strategic value. At a

recent Oxford Policy Engagement Network event, a participant called my attention to the UK's emerging diaspora framework. She also emphasised that similar efforts are visible everywhere, with her home village in Britain launching an initiative to benefit from those migrating to cities. She compared these processes to the functioning of alumni networks. This made me wonder: is diaspora engagement a novel phenomenon or merely the institutionalisation of long-standing informal practices rooted in loyalty? As global powers recognise its potential, efforts will undoubtedly move beyond economic motivations: their participation will be marked by a push towards what I termed 'ideological citizenship', drawing people into allegiance grounded in political aims.

This brings me to the only promise of my dissertation still left unfulfilled. I argued that the broader relevance of my research is that it sheds light on the evolving role of nation states. While I cannot predict the future with certainty, I can certainly offer my reflections. Globalisation, coupled with the surge in identity politics, has led to a shift away from rigid national affiliations. Increasingly, individuals choose issue-based identities, which are often cultivated transnationally as part of 'digital tribes'. As citizens become less intrinsically attached to the nation-state, governments will likely respond by intensifying efforts to assert control, becoming more autocratic in the process. As part of this mechanism, rising demands will be placed on citizens. An emerging trend is citizenship-based taxation, which obliges migrants to contribute income taxes in their country of origin – a measure currently under consideration by the Hungarian government. Eventually, the nation-state system will reach a breaking point due to discontent and necessitate rethinking and reorganisation.

Consequently, for those who will still have the option to move – something increasingly uncertain in today's restrictive climate –, future choices of location may be guided by where autocratic regimes have not yet taken hold. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, most people are not driven by ideological alignment to left or right, but simply by wanting to live freely and invest in futures in which their efforts are reciprocated. As such, studies like mine warn of foreboding futures. The forces I documented in my dissertation are bound to amplify around the world. Yet, I remain convinced that, just as my participants were able to contest, navigate, and selectively engage with the citizenship expectations of their home countries, human agency will always find ways to carve options beyond the confines of restrictive systems.

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Appendix

Research Information Sheet

The Cultivation of Diaspora Subjectivity and Post-Migration Experiences of the Homeland: A Comparative Study amongst Hungarian and Venezuelan Emigrants in London

Purpose of Study: Within the framework of my PhD degree at the University of Oxford, I focus on emigrants from Venezuela and Hungary to understand experiences of the homeland in the context of migration and the relevance these continue to hold in the host country. While in both cases, my participants constitute parts of a large-scale emigration, as they come from different political, ideological and economic realities and undergo different migration processes, they might have different ideas of home, belonging as well as mutual responsibilities with their home country and co-nationals. Within the frames of my research, I would like to explore what are the diverging ways people encounter and reconstitute the home and host country in their lives post-migration and in what ways they embrace or contest the claims made on them by their homeland or alternatively, how do they craft ways to reconnect to it themselves.

Project institution: University of Oxford, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Head of Department: Dr David Pratten, david.pratten@anthro.ox.ac.uk

Funding body: Economic and Social Research Council, St John's College, and School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography

Principal investigator's contacts: Judit Molnár, DPhil candidate, judit.molnar@sjc.ox.ac.uk

University ethics committee: email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk, telephone: + 44 (0)1865616578.

University Data Protection Officer: data.protection@admin.ox.ac.uk or +44(0)1865 2)70285.

Use of data: The answers you give will form the basis of my DPhil dissertation and research output in English. Your answers will be pseudonymised and your name or any information identifying you will not be revealed. Only I and my supervisors will have access to this data. Your answers will be stored separately from personal data (that is, your name and any information that could identify you). All files will be password-protected. Storage devices, such as the computer's hard drive, will be encrypted. I will keep the data for a minimum of three years after the end of the project, but possibly longer to enable future publications.

Individual rights:

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which came into effect on 25 May 2018, you have the following rights in relation to the information that we hold about you (your 'personal data').

- **The right to request access to your data** (commonly known as a "subject access request"). This enables you to receive a copy of your data and to check that we are lawfully processing it.
- **The right to request correction of your data.** This enables you to ask us to correct any incomplete or inaccurate information we hold about you.
- **The right to request erasure of your data**. This enables you to ask us to delete or remove your data in certain circumstances for example, if you consider that there is no good reason for us continuing to process it. You also have the right to ask us to delete or remove your data where you have exercised your right to object to processing (see below).
- **The right to object to the processing** of your data, where we are processing it to meet our public tasks or legitimate interests (or the legitimate interests of a third party) and there is something about your particular situation, which makes you want to object to processing on this ground.
- **The right to request that the processing of your data is restricted**. This enables you to ask us to suspend the processing of your data, for example, if you want us to establish its accuracy or the reason for processing it.
- **Request the transfer of your data to another party**.

University of Oxford, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography





Judit Molnár
DPhil candidate
Judit.molnar@sjc.ox.ac.uk

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference: SAME_C1A_22-023

The Cultivation of Diaspora Subjectivity and Post-migration Experiences of the Homeland: A Comparative Study amongst Hungarian and Venezuelan Emigrants in London

Purpose of Study: Within the framework of my PhD degree at the University of Oxford, I focus on emigrants from Venezuela and Hungary to understand experiences of the homeland in the context of migration and the relevance these continue to hold in the host country. While in both cases, my participants constitute parts of a large-scale emigration, as they come from different political, ideological and economic realities and undergo different migration processes, they might have different ideas of home, belonging as well as mutual responsibilities with their home country and co-nationals. Within the frames of my research, I would like to explore what are the diverging ways people encounter and reconstitute the home and host country in their lives post-migration and in what ways they embrace or contest the claims made on them by their homeland or alternatively, how do they craft ways to reconnect to it themselves.

Please initial each box

1 ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for bove study. I have had the opportunity to consider the nation, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2 ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free hdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty.

3 ☐ I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

4 ☐ I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how ta will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

5 ☐ I rstand how this research will be written up and published.

6 I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint. ☐

7 I consent to being audio recorded. ☐

8 I agree to the use of pseudonymised quotes in research outputs. ☐

9 I agree to take part in the study. ☐

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature

_____	dd / mm / yyyy	_____
Name of person taking consent	Date	Signature

Fieldwork interview questions guide

Demographic questions:

How old are you?
How long have you lived in London?
Have you lived anywhere else before?
Approximately where do you live in London?
Where did you live in Hungary/Venezuela?
What do you do?
What did you do in Hungary/Venezuela?
What is your qualification?

In-depth questions for elaboration:

Could you tell me a bit about your life before you left?
Why did you decide to emigrate?
Do you remember the moment when the decision was made?
What did your friends/family say about your plan to migrate?
What do you think society thought about migration at that time in your home country?
What kind of emotions do you have towards your country due to your emigration?
While you were still there, were you trying to change Hungary/Venezuela in any way? (demonstrations, civic engagement, etc.)
Why did you choose London? What attracted you?
Can you describe the process of migration?
How did you say goodbye to your country?
What image did you have in your mind about migration?
Do you remember anybody in your childhood/early life who migrated and who shaped your image on what it means to be a migrant?
Did you know anybody in the UK?
Did you receive any help with your migration from compatriots?
Did you receive any help with your migration from anybody else?
How was it to be a new migrant here?
What were some difficulties and how did you overcome them?
What does it mean for you to be a migrant now?
How would you describe life in the UK as opposed to Hungary/Venezuela?
What are the biggest differences and how do you feel about them?
Would you say that you are happy here?
Do you think you have become integrated here?
Do you feel at home here?
Have you experienced any discrimination in the UK?
What are the things you miss most from Hungary/Venezuela?
What kind of connection do you maintain with Hungary/Venezuela?
Do you keep in touch with family/friends? How often?

Do you try to keep your culture alive here and how?
How often do you speak Hungarian/Spanish?
Eat Hungarian/Venezuelan food?
Go to a Hungarian/Venezuelan restaurant in London?
Listen to Hungarian/Venezuelan music, watch films or consume any type of media?
Do you practice any Hungarian/Venezuelan arts?
Do you support your country in any way from here?
Do you support your family or friends in Hungary/Venezuela?
How involved are you in homeland politics?
Are you a member of any Hungarian/Venezuelan organisations here in the UK?
What does it mean for you to belong to this organisation?
Do you think that emigrants can have any impact on the home country from outside?
How do you think mass outmigration has impacted/impacts the home country?
How do you see the future of your country?
What would be your ideal outcome?
Do you plan to return at any stage?
Have you been back for visits? If so, how was the experience?
Do you read news from home? How does it make you feel?
Whom do you surround yourself with in the UK? Who are your friends?
How do you feel about your Hungarian/Venezuelan identity?
Is there a feeling of community amongst Hungarians/Venezuelans here?
What are the key aspects of this community? What unites you?
What are the main resources within the Hungarian/Venezuelan community that helps you?
Could you count on fellow Hungarians/Venezuelans if you had problems here?
Do you think there is a feeling of solidarity amongst compatriots?
Are you trying to support Hungarians/Venezuelans in any way, either in the home country or in London?
Do you send remittances?
Would you help somebody from your home country to emigrate?
Do you feel solidarity with Hungarians/Venezuelans still in the home country and if so, in what way?
What do you think of the diaspora initiatives provided by your country?
Do you think the home country should provide help for emigrants?
How about the UK? What kind of help/resources should it provide to immigrants?
What kind of help is still missing?
How has Brexit impacted you?
What does socialism/nationalism mean to you?
Do you think people are responsible for their own well-being or it’s the state’s responsibility?
What is one message you would like to convey to the world about the Hungarians/Venezuelans in the UK?
Is there anything else you would like to say?