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EXPERIENCING POLITICAL MIGRATION: INTENTIONAL OBLIVION, DEPRESSION, AND THE UNAVAILABILITY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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Experiencing Political Migration: Intentional Oblivion, Depression, and the Unavailability of Collective Action

In recent years, Europe has embraced tens of thousands of political migrants who found themselves compelled to relocate due to their disagreement with the political trends in their home countries. The baggage of memories about political oppression and suffering with it significantly affects their integration into host communities. It may prove crucial for future peacebuilding, pose new challenges for psychological support and healthcare systems, and influence societal trust in host communities.

Intentional Oblivion as an Adaptation to Trauma

Consider a scenario where a young scientist named Mary experiences a failure in her first conference presentation. The feelings of fear and shame can potentially jeopardize her scientific career and overall well-being. Imagine the

technologies that safely erase memories of specific traumatic events. How free should Mary be to turn to these technologies? Would she lose a part of herself along with the memories of failure, and does the technology of selective memory erasure imply other ethical challenges? Is the desire to rid oneself of unpleasant memories a sign of the decline of collective sensitivity toward a 'painless civilization' (Morioka 2021)?

Bio- and neuroethical articles exploring the regulation of new technologies are replete with narratives involving selective memory erasure (Lavazza 2019). Despite the development of such means not appearing imminent, these discussions shed light on our moral intuitions about memory, identity, and the boundaries of technological intervention in cognitive processes. However, the memory of a traumatic event frequently intertwines with collective memory.

In a world filled with conflicts, disasters, and forced migration, new forms of collective remembrance and forgetting are continually emerging. Individuals fleeing from intolerable conditions in their home countries often find themselves isolated in their new residences. Cognitive studies reveal that this isolation significantly contributes to memory deterioration. Middle-aged and elderly migrants tend to watch television extensively, which notably affects their memory (Torres *et al.* 2020). This memory decline can be viewed as a strategy of adaptation through intentional oblivion, a less selective method than memory erasure technologies discussed in neuroethics.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic and wars that began in the 2020s have led to the pervasive spread of doomscrolling – incessant and anxious scrolling through news feeds (Price *et al.* 2022). At first glance, doomscrolling

appears to be a wholly irrational habit that contributes to retraumatization and hinders coping with the consequences of a collective traumatic event. In the case of individual difficulty, it can be considered a simple distraction, as news and social media will not focus on the traumatic event. However, in the case of a collective disaster, digital media will consistently remind individuals of it, without providing any ideas about possible actions or coping strategies.

Nevertheless, the investigation of the political migrants' experiences and their digital habits paints a different picture of facing collective disaster. In this context, doomscrolling helps forget the lost world where meaningful collective and/or public actions were possible. The structures of such experiences – where memory and depression intertwine – combine disengagement with the past and future, the suppression of the realm of possibilities, and an eroding sense of togetherness. These features affect the integration of migrants into host communities and their healthcare and social support needs.

'Living in a Different World': Collective Disaster and Depression

Studying strategies of remembrance and forgetting, I interviewed 10 political migrants who left Belarus after 2020 or Russia after 2022. At the time of the interviews, they were mainly in Serbia, but there were also individuals in Germany, Israel, Lithuania, and Poland. More than half of them were women aged 30-50. Some had experienced direct politically motivated violence in their home country, while others only perceived its possibility. Nevertheless, they all characterized the events in their homeland as a collective catastrophe, the primary reason for their change of residence.

The main objective of the interviews was to identify the universal structures in the experience of remembering, forgetting, and passing through a collective traumatic event among political migrants. Differences in locations and living conditions only emphasized the common features of such an experience. This research did not aim to provide a social portrait of a specific group of political migrants; it can be considered phenomenological rather than social (Martiny, Toro, Høffding 2021). Therefore, the interviewees mainly responded to open questions about their daily activities and feelings, memories, and plans – since all of these reflect the significant features of their experience.

Interviewees, in one way or another, characterized their current state as 'living in a different world'. In this context, 'different' implies a temporal distinction rather than a spatial one. Their life in the homeland, up to a certain point, felt meaningful – building social connections, resisting injustice, pursuing self-development and a career. The fear of political persecution was present in this life, but it did not empty it of meaning or paralyze it. However, at a certain moment, all other actions lost their significance, evaluated from personal, group, or social perspectives. The interviewees retrospectively characterized this moment as 'tragic', 'catastrophic' or 'disastrous' creating a difference between the past and present worlds. The themes of adaptation abroad and immersion in a new cultural and linguistic environment mostly played a subordinate role in characterizing the 'different world.'

The moment of collective catastrophe shapes practices of remembering and forgetting, and defines the difference between the past and the current world. Up to a certain point, previous activities in the homeland had meaning, but then lost it – thus, memories of them are perceived as

causing unnecessary suffering. Memories of losing meaning are also painful, but reflections on the moment of such a loss are assessed as a potential source of a new meaningful life.

'Living in a different world' is also a key characteristic of the experience of depression. Depression alters the fundamental structures of world-experience, and the world reveals itself as devoid of meaning and alienating. The difference is not necessarily in the state of things but in the very distinct experience of interacting with those things. The remoteness of this past world is also an important phenomenological feature of depression. Events that occurred recently may feel as though they happened in the distant past – historical rather than biographical.

Both features – distinctiveness of the current world and disengagement with the past – are characteristic of the experience of collective tragedy among political migrants. They often characterize their performance through depressive symptoms. More than half of the interviewees are engaged in collective and individual practices of psychological support.

However, their relationship to the past significantly contrasts with the characteristics of depressive experiences highlighted by phenomenologically oriented researchers (Ratcliffe 2014: 194–195). Two types of memories – 'horrible past' and 'guilty past' – are considered most typical for people with clinical depression. 'Horrible past' often refers not just to a shocking event, but to blaming other people – mainly for not noticing or not dealing with some problem. 'Guilty past' is associated with a sense of personal failure, worthlessness, or incapacity for action.

Considering the limited nature of the study of political migrants, it is worth noting that both of these topics were almost absent from their narratives. The most traumatizing memories were not linked to the horror of collective disaster but rather involved the images of meaningful actions in the past. The inability to return to these meaningful practices, to reproduce meaningful actions, influenced their perception of current opportunities. In this case, the contrast with the past creates an alienating present, whereas for clinical depression the causation is reversed: current suppression of the realm of possibilities induces disengagement from the past.

This specific sense of disengagement with the past – collective and individual – redefines the experience of doomscrolling. It transforms from a mechanism of retraumatization into a means of immersion in a new eventuality. However, this does not necessarily mean the means is effective. Interviewees noted that short messages are not the best way to construct a new personal or shared narrative.

'Political Depression' and Positive Peace as a Collective Affair

Migrants do not have inner barriers to seeking psychological support, while practices of 'information hygiene' and 'digital detox' are familiar to them from their previous lives. However, despite the ease of assimilation into supportive practices, most respondents tended to perceive their emotional state as heavy and worrying, with no clear prospects for improvement. The phrase "therapy has lost its efficacy" echoed throughout the interviews. In the past, psychological support had been instrumental in overcoming loss, emptiness, or fear. However, the current signs of depression among migrants differ from their

previous depressive experiences, including the experience of a clinically diagnosed major depressive disorder.

The relationship between political suppression and clinical depression is complex, and differently characterized by various academic perspectives. The scholar Ann Cvetkovich coined the term "political depression" to describe a unique state resulting from oppression and inequality (Cvetkovich 2012). She advocates against medicalizing this condition, as it risks reducing political issues to personal matters. Nevertheless, in the analyzed narratives, political emotions and interpersonal difficulties proved to be part of personal pathographies. Phenomenological lenses allow us to avoid the dilemma of medicalization versus politicization, as we emphasize an existential sense of alienation from the past. By focusing on this, we draw closer to an understanding of the depressive experience. Both past actions and this feeling of unhomelikeness can be interpreted psychopathologically, as well as placed within the political domain. For instance, in states with visible totalitarian tendencies, authorities can perceive diagnosed depression as a sign of political dissatisfaction, as was the case in Nazi Germany (Sadowsky 2020).

Surveyed migrants attribute their depressive experiences to the inability to participate in public decision-making. They also note that the goal of oppressive regimes is precisely to diminish interest in public activities. Awareness of this situation compels them to pay more attention to mental health and information hygiene. However, political migrants rarely manage to focus psychological support efforts on connections between political and depressive experiences. Expressing their emotions during individual or collective psychological session often requires translating these emotions into the

realm of personal projects and strategies. One interviewee noted, "Sometimes it seems better not to talk about it than to present it in such a way."

Traumatic memories cannot fit into personal history. Consequently, forms of support oriented toward personal perspectives cannot adequately address the damage caused by collective life-changing events. Group activities in psychotherapy or art therapy allow individuals to emerge from social isolation. These and other forms of support also facilitate re-engagement with the future. However, as several interviewees point out, these two directions of psychological care exist independently of each other. They do not help rebuild a realm of collective possibilities – to restore the sense of a feasible future achievable through collective efforts.

This deficiency of supportive practices may be significant for future peacebuilding. Sociologist Johan Galtung proposed distinguishing negative peace as the absence of conflicts and positive peace as the restoration of relationships through collective creative activity (Galtung 1969). Political depression undermines this very ability for collective creative activity, generating a sense of its unattainability and meaninglessness. This seriously limits the participation of individuals experiencing such depression in recovery processes after big domestic and international conflicts, isolating and dividing citizens from the rest of the world.

The sense of meaninglessness in collective activity can also hinder the integration of migrants into host communities. Painful memories of a meaningful past make bureaucratic difficulties in a new place of residence appear as a collision with institutional absurdity. This only intensifies the feeling of alienation and disappointment,

with the belief that "everything is the same everywhere" and that joint public activity will never be possible. These narratives, extending beyond the migrant community, can reinforce a crisis of trust in governmental institutions and decisions among the host community.

These issues intersect with migrant healthcare needs. Some political migrants tend to medicalize their communication or mood issues, but the solution likely lies beyond medicine. Involving them in discussions on homeland matters and their potential contribution to host communities could help. This would reduce their vulnerability and alleviate the burden on local healthcare systems.

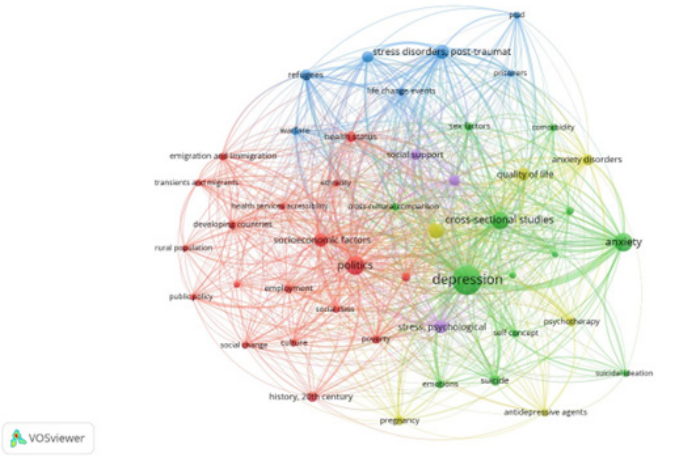


Fig. 1. Map of the 'political depression' field according to PubMed data

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