

## Problem

The enlargement of the EU in 2004 saw a significant increase in the movement of people from Central and Eastern European countries to the UK. Today, migrants from the region represent a significant minority of those residing in the country. Mass migration from CEE in this period was represented in overwhelmingly negative tones in the UK tabloids, as a threatening flood or wave, and the migrants themselves were constructed as low-skilled or even criminal (Spigelman, 2013). Once in the UK, CEE migrants often experience a complex form of discrimination that has been described as "xenoracism" (Fekete, 2001). Individuals and communities from these post-socialist countries are not always (or even often) seen as part of the fabric of British society. An ongoing distorted representation in the media is accompanied by a lack of representation in the cultural sphere. This is a crucial problem to address in efforts towards a more equal and connected society: cultural inclusion is key to avoiding an entrenchment of identities through an absence of representation (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016).

## Evidence

Numerous studies have highlighted the discrimination experienced by CEE migrants: this has included hate crime and playground bullying (Narkowicz, 2020; Tereshchenko, Bradbury and Archer, 2019); difficulty in having skills and qualifications recognised by UK employers (Johnston, Khattab and Manley, 2015) and negative stereotyping in the tabloid press (Spigelman, 2013; Rzepnikowska, 2019). A recent article in The Times described Polish people in the UK as the "silent minority" (Januszczak, 2021), whose art was only now beginning to speak. A report produced by Sara Jones with CEE Arts Space, Centrala (2021), demonstrated that CEE art was significantly underrepresented in Midlands' arts spaces in comparison to Western European and North American art and artists, something that was perceived as a lack by members of CEE communities. The report documented microaggressions and discrimination experienced by CEE migrant artists in their efforts to find a foothold in the UK's creative economies. We know that increased cultural representation can have positive outcomes including: giving minority groups a voice and allowing them to express their identity; reduction in poverty and social stress; reduction in ethnic and racial harassment; building empathy; and increasing civic engagement (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016). Underrepresentation means that CEE migrants are missing out on these potential benefits.

# POST-SOCIALIST BRITAIN?

## Representing Central and Eastern European Migrants through Community Art

Sara Jones, Oxana Bischin and Post-Socialist Britain? Memory, Representation and Political Identity amongst German and Polish Immigrants in the

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Post-Socialist Britain? (project website). <https://postsocialistbritain.bham.ac.uk/>  
 Testimony in Practice (project website). <https://testimonyinpractice.bham.ac.uk/>

Supported by AHRC Standard Grant AH/V001779/1

## Solution

Previous collaborations between Jones and Centrala have worked to represent migrant voices through artistic interpretation of their testimonies (see *Testimony in Practice*, 2019). Our AHRC-funded project, *Post-Socialist Britain?*, takes this one step further by working with CEE communities to produce and display their own artistic expressions. Our solution is a series of photography workshops in two Midlands' districts with a high population of CEE migrants: West Bromwich and Hyson Green. Professional photographer Oxana Bischin works with the participants to produce photographs of places and objects that are meaningful to them. The photographs act as a starting point for participants to tell their own stories, about their countries of origin, the experience of migration and their lives in the UK. The photographs and narratives will form the basis of a virtual and physical exhibition produced in collaboration with Centrala and an Artist in Residence and shown in Birmingham and Nottingham. The aim of the exhibition is to represent the histories and experiences of CEE migrants for a wider audience, but also to empower those communities through providing a means of self-expression and self-definition (Matarasso, 2007). The poster showcases the initial outcomes of this creative solution, drawing on the material produced in the first workshop series that ran February-April 2022 in West Bromwich.



"We decided to stay in England longer than we thought in the beginning. I wanted to stay for 1 year, now it is 11 years. The name of this picture is "Roots". If we plant something it means we will stay longer to see how it grows". (Sylwia)

"Before I always questioned myself about where I belong and where's my home and now I feel this is my home because my daughter's here and it's her home". (Sylwia)

"Nobody knows that Chopin was from Poland – that's the best example for me [of a lack of knowledge about Polish culture in the UK]" (Szymon)



"I remember when I first came to England in 2011, no-one except Polish and Latvian people celebrated Women's Day. One English woman from my first job didn't know about the day. [...] 10 years later, her husband gives her flowers on this day every year, because he knew from her Polish colleagues that it's Women's Day." (Sylwia)

"This is a picture of a whole store based on cultural foods from Poland. I think it's so cool, I think it's so great that something like that exists, because it connects you to where you are, wherever you are". (Alishah)

"I took pictures of some food from Afro-Caribbean stalls and some produce, a Polish shop that had their own produce, bringing their own identity here to help them feel like they belong. Because you do belong wherever you end up settling." (Alishah)

"It's very nice to be here in the UK and to be able to try different food from different countries." (Gosia)



"When you go inside the church, you see leaflets all in Polish. When I see Polish letters and Polish words in England anywhere, I feel more welcome". (Sylwia)



"We have completely different houses in Poland, single houses with grass in between. I'm talking about normal houses, because we have many more big buildings where there are like 1000 people. Especially from communist times". (Szymon)