

Moving across Borders: The Work Life Experiences of Czech Cross-border Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The experiences of cross-border workers (CBWs) and the difficulties they face during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have been neglected in previous research. CBWs experience various stressors under normal circumstances, where they are often subjected to unequal working conditions and forced to transition between two different societies. The measures that were introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the implementation of physical borders, further worsened the situation for these individuals. Herein, we draw on qualitative interview data from 35 CBWs from the Czech Republic and Germany to explore their experiences of work, stress, support, and their positioning in society during the pandemic. We detail the dissatisfaction felt by CBWs regarding re-bordering, the lack of coordination in the crisis management, and the lack of support from national governments and the EU. This study provides unique insights into the difficulties and experiences of CBWs in a time of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; dual labour market; rebordering; cross-border commuters; low-status

Introduction

To contain the COVID-19 pandemic and slow the spread of the virus, various governments in the European Union (EU) Schengen region closed their borders to neighbouring countries with significant effects on individuals, businesses, macroeconomic factors, and to society as whole (Dhungana, 2020; Medeiros *et al.*, 2021). One group that has been particularly impacted by these measures are the so-called cross-border workers (CBWs). CBWs are individuals that work in one country while residing in another, typically commuting several times a week between the two states (Buch *et al.*, 2009). Recent estimates suggest that more than two million workers cross the borders daily for work in the European common market (Medeiros *et al.*, 2021). Due to the Schengen agreement and the implementation of a common European market, CBWs enjoy freedom of movement across the EU. As such, they can gain employment in neighbouring countries and cross borders to reach their workplaces under normal conditions (Del Sarto, 2014; Karstens, 2020). Despite their economic importance, research into the personal and professional experiences of CBWs in the EU, and more specifically during times of crisis, is lacking (Haindorfer, 2020). However, the literature shows that the number of CBWs has reduced drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic (Böhm, 2021). This could be attributed to various potential reasons, including fear of SARS-CoV-2 infection, increased remote working policies, contract terminations and other unfavourable employment conditions (Böhm, 2021; Rausis and Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2021). In addition, border crossings

between certain member states, such as between the Czech Republic and Germany, was made more difficult during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may be another contributing factor (Novotny, 2021).

Despite the collective efforts of the EU and individual member states to maintain the sustainable and safe cross-border employment experienced pre-COVID-19 (Abad *et al.*, 2018), the pandemic has significantly affected cross-border commuting. Rather than being shining examples of solidarity and collaborative efforts to find effective solutions against COVID-19, European governments responded with unilaterally imposed measures, as well as rebordering (Novotny, 2021). Rebordering refers to the reintroduction of (temporary) border controls or complete border closures within the EU (Böhm, 2020, 2021; Nonnenmacher *et al.*, 2021). Importantly, the closure of internal borders during the initial COVID-19 wave opposed the fundamental narrative of European integration. Moreover, individual states imposed restrictions that lacked harmony and collaboration with neighbouring states, and with the EU (Medeiros *et al.*, 2021).

In March 2020, early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU released the Commission's Guidelines for border management measures to protect health and to maintain the availability of goods and essential services (EU Commission, 2020; Felbermayr *et al.*, 2018). However, agreement on a new resolution for the European protection of cross-border and seasonal workers, in the context of the pandemic, was only introduced by the EU Parliament in June 2020 (European Parliament, 2020). This agreement called on members of the EU to consider and respect the interests of CBWs with specific regards to the common market and labour law obligations (EU Commission, 2020). In comparison to the recent focus on collective European policies, these agreements arrived late and were inadequately implemented by individual governments, thereby complicating the personal and professional lives of CBWs (Medeiros *et al.*, 2021; Rhinard, 2019). The imposed unilateral measures led to the disruption and/or suspension of public transport networks, resulting in disrupted commutes for CBWs, whether by public or private transport, due to reinstated border controls and border closures (DW, 2021; Novotny, 2021). Considering the importance of CBWs for many businesses and industries in the border areas within the EU, there is an urgent need to address and provide solutions to the challenges faced by CBWs during these extraordinary times.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected experiences of work, stress and support for CBWs. Moreover, we also investigate their perception of the common labour market and their position in society. This work is guided by the following three research questions: (1) how have COVID-19 restrictions affected the daily work of CBWs and what are the key stressors experienced? (2) What sources of support have CBWs drawn from during the COVID-19 pandemic? (3) How have COVID-19 restrictions affected the perception of CBWs with regards to their standing in society?

To this end, we draw from the dual-labour market theory, which distinguishes between two separate labour market segments – primary and secondary (Dekker and van der Veen, 2017). The primary segment is characterized by high wages, job security and career opportunities, while employment conditions in the secondary segment are less favourable with lower wages and lower social status (Ashton and Maguire, 1984). Results from this study add to our understanding of CBWs, an under-represented workforce that has faced particularly difficult challenges during the pandemic, and a group that has traditionally

been ignored in the literature. Further, this work provides a more detailed evaluation of their experiences of work and perceptions of their societal positioning in their home and host country (Novotny, 2021).

In this article, we first introduce the study perspective, outlining the difficulties faced by CBWs commuting between the Czech Republic and Germany in the context of the dual-labour market theory, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, we explain the methodology of this study, followed by a discussion of our findings. Finally, the theoretical and practical contributions are considered, and suggestions for future studies are presented.

I. Cross-border Commuting between the Czech Republic and Germany

Since the Czech Republic fully joined the European common market by becoming part of the EU in 2004 and joining the Schengen Agreement in 2007, crossing the border between the two countries has become easy. Because of this, cross-border commuting has also become easier due to an improving infrastructure along the 817 km border between the Czech Republic and Germany (Haindorfer, 2019; Wiesböck, 2016). Since then, CBWs have been a normal part of everyday life in the border regions of Germany and the Czech Republic (Novotny, 2021). Although the infrastructure still favours individual forms of transport, consisting of many border crossings for cars and pedestrians, the network of trains between the two countries has been set on the agenda in both countries (Ilik and Pomykala, 2018; Medeiros, 2019).

Despite the growing average income over the past 20 years in the Czech Republic, there is still a wealth gap between eastern and western European countries (Favell, 2008; Haindorfer, 2020). Based on this economic difference and a variety of employment opportunities in Germany, commuting between these two countries has become an important strategy to secure a job and improve living standards for many Czech CBWs (Haindorfer, 2020). CBWs often search for opportunities to work across the border and are met with a high demand for labour from organizations located in the German border region. Despite tensions between the two countries and rejection from parts of the German border communities due to fears of losing job opportunities and deep-seated prejudices, many businesses in the border region would struggle to find sufficient personnel without CBWs (Peyrony *et al.*, 2021). Industries such as health and elderly care, logistics and skilled trades are especially dependent on the international workforce (Buch *et al.*, 2009; Nonnenmacher *et al.*, 2021; Wille, 2010).

The Association of CBWs in the Czech Republic estimates that before the pandemic more than 100,000 Czech nationals that live in proximity to the border, were working in Germany. They commute daily or at least once a week across the border and in many cases accept low-status jobs in industries that are less prominent and less appealing to German citizens. These jobs are often referred to as jobs in the secondary labour market (Haindorfer, 2020).

II. CBWs and the Dual Labour Market

The dual labour market theory presents a useful approach to study the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the Czech cross-border workforce. The dual-labour market

theory distinguishes between primary and a secondary segments of Western mass production labour markets (Ashton and Maguire, 1984). While the primary segment is occupied primarily by German citizens and other highly skilled expatriates, the secondary segment labour market is typically unappealing to most host-country nationals (Harrison and Sum, 1979; Hirsch, 2016; Hirsch and Mueller, 2012). The secondary segment includes jobs that are often characterized by low-status positions, poor working conditions, lower wages, and temporary labour relations (Pérez and Osuna, 2014).

Nonetheless, jobs in the secondary segment of the labour market are often occupied by non-nationals, including low-status expatriates, migrants and CBWs (Pires and Nunes, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2001). This is also the case in Germany where many jobs in the secondary market segment are occupied by workers from eastern European countries (for example the Czech Republic) (Molitor and Seils, 2018). Especially in the border region, CBWs represent a significant proportion of employees in the secondary segment who are often employed on short-term contracts, by subcontractors, and receive lower wages than their host country national colleagues (Haindorfer, 2020). However, because economic factors are key motivators for many CBWs, they accept poor working conditions since their pay in the host country is higher than in many primary segment occupations in their home country (Haindorfer, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, due to a lack of job opportunities in their home countries, jobs in bordering countries seem more attractive, despite being in the secondary sector. The over-representation of CBWs in the secondary segment and the challenges they face have downstream implications for their social standing in the host-country.

The lack of time spent in their host country due to high workloads and long commute times restricts a deeper integration into host country communities. This negatively affects acceptance, as well as the self-perceived societal standing of CBWs in the host country society (Haindorfer, 2013; Karacsony *et al.*, 2021; Novotny, 2021; Wille, 2010). Consequently, this can lead to a situation where host-country nationals misconceive CBWs as 'familiar strangers' instead of fellow members of their society (Wille, 2010). Simultaneously, this can also lead CBWs to feel alienated from their home country networks. Even if these individuals are able to draw from a positive comparison of their individual living conditions and social standing with others from their home country (Haindorfer, 2020), these are often only short-term effects. Such short-term effects manifest in the form of an increase in social status in the host-country due to their overseas employment. However, these are often reversed in the long-term through different processes of estrangement. These include distancing from the home country network due to differing interests, allegations of arrogance, and limited free time to maintain relationships (Haindorfer, 2013).

As commuters, CBWs might benefit from their social networks in the host country (for example families and friends); however, other sources of support are often missing. Taken together, along with the difficult and often unequal employment conditions, as well as the constant pressure they experience due to societal disintegration in both their host and the home country, CBWs are faced with significant challenges. These conditions create a difficult environment that negatively affects the personal and professional lives of these individuals in normal times (Böhm, 2021; Haindorfer, 2013; Pires and Nunes, 2018). Moreover, in times of global crises and challenging economic situations, the combination of

inequality, social alienation, and a lack of support in the host country may further worsen the lived experiences of CBWs (Haist and Kurth, 2022).

III. CBWs and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all parts of German businesses and society. However, employers located close to the border faced serious challenges when the borders were closed because closed borders meant that their employees were unable to travel to their workplaces (DW, 2021). As a result, short-term work was implemented in many industries and systematically relevant employers (for example hospitals) were forced to adopt different strategies to maintain services with sufficient staffing. The various restrictions imposed in Germany and the Czech Republic between 2020 and 2021, had a particularly negative impact on the secondary segment (Holtbrügge, 2021).

Due to precarious contracts, subcontractors, and a lack of sufficient knowledge about employment legislation, especially in low-status employment, the secondary labour market was more severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic than the primary market (Haist and Kurth, 2022; Holtbrügge, 2021). CBWs experienced changing circumstances in both countries including border closures, which prevented or severely restricted commuting for over three months. In addition to the normal stressors experienced by CBWs, the imposed restrictions led to low levels of host- and home country social interactions and subsequent increased isolation and worsening of their self-perceived standing in society (Cavallaro and Dianin, 2020; Haindorfer, 2013).

Additionally, recent studies show that individuals in low-status occupations find it difficult to draw from external sources of support in normal times. This is exacerbated in times of crisis (Haak-Saheem *et al.*, 2021; Haist and Kurth, 2022). The authors of these studies show that sources of support from external specialists, including governments, councils, and NGOs, as well as support from within an individual's social network (for example friends and colleagues in the host country), are largely limited especially when the individual works abroad (Haist and Kurth, 2022).

CBWs are faced with a uniquely challenging situation in the secondary sector of the common labour market of the EU, and it is unclear how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their personal and professional experiences in their host countries. Therefore, the present study aims to evaluate the lived experiences of CBWs in the Czech Republic and Germany during times of calamity. Drawing from the dual-labour market theory, the objectives of this research are threefold: (1) to explore the experience of stress and work of CBWs in the context of the common European labour market in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) to evaluate the sources of support that CBWs drew from to deal with the stressors experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) to evaluate the ways in which COVID-19 measures have affected how CBWs identify themselves as part of European, German, and Czech societies.

IV. Methods

Due to our limited understanding of the situation faced by CBWs we have chosen an interpretivist method of inquiry, which uses an inductive approach to extend current theory by highlighting the issues experienced by those that have been most affected by the

COVID-19 pandemic (Alvesson, 2003). We utilized in-depth qualitative interviews to focus on the individual experiences of CBWs and to gain insights into the interplay between their experience of stress, support, and standing in society (Reissner and Whittle, 2022). As stated by Weick (2007), ‘if an event can happen in one place, then it likely can happen again’. Therefore, while we do not claim our findings to be applicable to the general population of CBWs, the value of our approach provides illustrative power beyond our sample population.

Participants

CBWs are difficult to access for research purposes due to two main reasons. Firstly, as a result of their employment status, a large number of CBWs are not subject to social security contributions (Buch *et al.*, 2009) and therefore, are not included in official employment statistics. Moreover, there is no available official register of CBWs and little access to information from organizations and Unions due to general data protection reasons. Secondly, CBWs often do not respond to research study invitations because of their busy schedules (Möller *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, and similar to previous studies (for example Thomas, 2020), personal contacts and intermediaries were used to contact CBWs for data collection from the Czech Republic. The Euroregion Elbe was chosen as a case study for this work because it has one of the highest densities of CBWs in Germany and these individuals were directly affected by the border closures between 2020 and 2021 (Novotny, 2021). Moreover, focusing on this area allows for an in-depth exploration into the circumstances faced CBWs in a single region with similar contextual factors. Such factors include the COVID-19 measures, border controls, and a consistently large population of CBWs (Novotny, 2021). The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: (1) participants that cross the Czech–German border at least twice a week to commute to their workplace, (2) those that have been doing so for at least one year, (3) individuals that live in the regions of Liberec, Ústí nad Labem, Karlovy Vary and Plzeň, and (4) are employed in the secondary sector of the German labour market. The final sample of this study consisted of 35 CBWs across different sectors in Germany, including healthcare, the food industry, as well as transport and logistics (see Table 1). Given that this research evaluates the individual experiences of CBWs, a sample of 35 participants is adequate to answer the proposed research questions (Marshall *et al.*, 2013; Reissner and Whittle, 2022; Saunders and Townsend, 2016).

Data Collection

Telephone interviews are a useful method to conduct interviews, as they provide an opportunity for participants to answer questions in a private and safe environment. Further, this method ensured the safety and legal requirements of the researcher and participants were met due to the COVID-19 restrictions (Block and Erskine, 2012; Johnson *et al.*, 2019). As such, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with CBWs. Even though most participants had a basic level of German literacy, all interviews were conducted and recorded in Czech to avoid misunderstandings and increase accuracy. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

A 30-minute interview schedule was developed to allow in-depth discussion of all three key aspects to account for the busy schedules of the interviewees and increase the

Table 1: Summary of Participants

<i>Nr.</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Years of commuting</i>
1	Markéta	F	22	Food Industry	Service	1
2	Tom	M	27	Maintenance	Mechanic	9
3	Tomáš	M	36	Maintenance	Bicycle repairman	10
4	Martin	M	28	Hospitality	Attendant	5
5	Petra	F	22	Food Industry	Fast food service	1
6	Petr	M	40	Transport/Logistics	Driver	8
7	David	M	35	Maintenance	Caretaker/fitter	6
8	Karel	M	38	Transport/Logistics	Driver	9
9	Radka	F	46	Cleaning	Cleaning woman	5
10	Samuel	M	27	Food Industry	Waiter	2
11	Veronika	F	41	Finance	Service	4
12	Lenka	F	35	Healthcare	Nurse	9
13	Luboš	M	44	Transport/Logistics	Driver	9
14	Štěpán	M	52	Construction	Bricklayer	11
15	Vladimír	M	43	Transport/Logistics	Driver	9
16	Petr	M	27	Construction	Construction worker	5
17	Alexandr	M	31	Construction	Construction worker	4
18	Markéta	F	40	Cleaning	Cleaning woman	3
19	Jiří	M	56	Construction	Flooring installer	6
20	Daniel	M	48	Construction	Roofer	12
21	Jan	M	41	Construction	Roofer	8
22	Honza	M	34	Maintenance	Technician	5
23	Vladimír	M	43	Construction	Glazier	9
24	Zdeněk	M	23	Construction	Construction worker	1
25	Jonáš	M	21	Maintenance	Welder	2
26	Michael	M	22	Maintenance	Technician	2
27	Pavla	F	42	Healthcare	Nurse	7
28	Marie	F	27	Healthcare	Nurse	7
29	Jitka	F	40	Healthcare	Nurse	10
30	Tereza	F	36	Healthcare	Nurse	7
31	Magda	F	41	Cleaning	Cleaning woman	4
32	Lubomír	M	27	Transport/Logistics	Driver	3
33	Pavčina	F	33	Healthcare	Nurse	4
34	Zbyněk	M	33	Construction	Bricklayer	8
35	Václav	M	32	Transport/Logistics	Driver	4

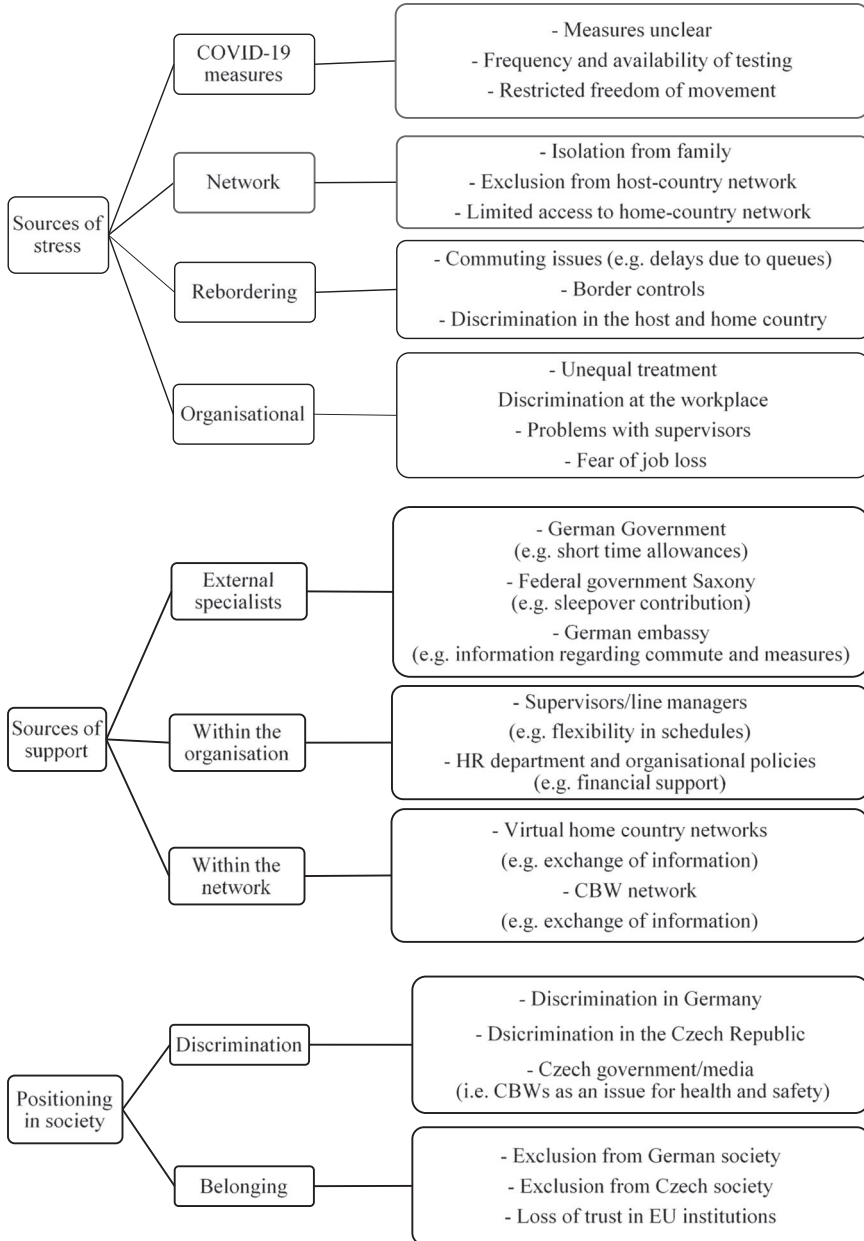
likelihood of their participation (Irvine, 2011). Firstly, their experiences of the general work and commuting conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the availability of support from external actors and how these shaped their evaluation of their current situation and their perception of the common market. Thirdly, the effects of the border closures and restrictions for commuters and how they perceive their position in society.

Analysis

The data were inductively analysed using a thematic analysis approach to identify issues and problems faced by CBWs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the implemented support provided by employers and other social actors (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To ensure

the validity of the coding used in this study, we developed a coding system according to suggestions made by Morse (2015) resulting in nine themes across the three categories (that is, stress, support and society). To further validate the coding process, the data were independently coded by two researchers.

Figure 1: Coding Framework



V. Findings

The data analyses resulted in 24 codes that were combined into nine themes and structured along the three aforementioned categories (Figure 1) to answer the research questions.

Sources of Stress

Overall, most participants in this study stated that their experiences of work changed significantly during the pandemic. While some participants were able to work from home, participants who were forced to commute to work and were not put on a short-term contract reported feeling ambiguous about their work. Thirteen participants spoke about how their employers were sympathetic towards them and excused lateness and adapted shift schedules to accommodate them:

One thing is interesting about this whole COVID story: my relationships with the boss have intensified and actually improved. It's because we just need to communicate more and plan everything a lot more. (Pavĺina, 33, nurse)

Despite the positive experiences of some commuters, most participants highlighted additional issues at work due to the pandemic. For example, they spoke of increased stress because of the time they had to spend planning for work shifts, and because commuting was more difficult, mainly due to the controls, queues, and the hostile atmosphere at the border. These factors increased the commute time by two or more hours in some instances. As a result, participants were often late for work and therefore had to work later into the day, which meant that they returned home much later than before. This, in turn, also affected their personal lives. For some participants, these challenges resulted in disputes with their employers. The most articulated stressors for participants were increased tensions with German co-workers. Disagreements and complaints between host country co-workers arose because of their issues at the border, leading to negative arguments and quarrels with colleagues. These arguments had a negative impact on their experiences at work and exacerbated their feeling of loneliness and dissociation from host country colleagues. Participants highlighted feelings of insecurity and fears of being unable to work, or even losing their jobs:

COVID-19 got me and I think that all other commuters are a bit insecure as well. I've never been so scared of losing my job as I was during the COVID-19 period. (Magda, 41, cleaner)

Several participants stated that the already stressful process of commuting, was made worse because of the aggressive and tense atmosphere at the border. Despite the looming anxiety due to the daily commute, most participants declined offers from their employers to stay in Germany during the week or for the duration of the crisis because they feared losing contact with their friends and family.

Additionally, participants mentioned the often obvious inequality regarding shift allocation. They complained that the most exhausting shifts were allocated to commuters, rather than there being an equal division between employees. Moreover, some participants experienced xenophobic encounters with patients and despite requesting reallocation, they were repeatedly expected to work in COVID-19 hospital wards. Participants

argued that there would have been sufficient staff for staff rotation and described this management approach as an act of discrimination.

Sources of Support

Three key sources of support were discussed in this study: employers, families and friends in the home country, as well as the German Government. Most CBWs described their employers to be the most important source of support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants described different ways in which employers ensured that they received their salary even if short-term allowances were not available. Other participants discussed how they received support from their employers in the form of increased flexibility, helping them to feel less stressed about the otherwise difficult situation. Other employers offered CBWs subsidised local accommodation. While some participants found these attempts helpful, others argued that they significantly increased the pressure they felt, as highlighted by Zdeněk (23, construction worker):

The matter of the closed borders was clear, we had to stay in Germany for five months. The boss told us, either you stay or, unfortunately, I will not have any work for you.

Furthermore, these offers also isolated CBWs even more from their families in their home country as described by Magda (41, cleaner):

[...] when the border was closed in March, we had to decide who would stay at home and who would stay in Germany. So, I stayed in Germany. But it wasn't pleasant. [...] I do not like to think back to that time.

Despite such examples of dissatisfaction, employers played a key role in providing assistance to their workforce. Most participants in this study discussed the goodwill and overall support they received from their employers. In contrast, participants indicated a lack of sufficient support from the Czech and German governments, as well as from the EU.

The German government was judged as being both helpful and unsupportive during the first 18 months of the pandemic. After the first strict closure of the border between Germany and the Czech Republic, the German government issued a list of jobs deemed to be systemically relevant. Individuals working these jobs were theoretically allowed to cross the border with the appropriate documents and tests. This was particularly important for people working in healthcare, maintenance and logistics. Additionally, several participants received short-term allowances and support during the various peaks of the crises until they were able to return to work. Other participants were either still in full-time work, or their employers did not apply for salary support schemes, resulting in participants having to take unpaid leave or work for a lower salary.

The lack of communication and preparation at the borders in winter 2020, when the border controls were intensified due to higher incident numbers in the Czech Republic, was named as one of the key issues on the German side. As a result, people were forced to queue for hours until they could get their COVID-19 tests and cross the border:

Once it happened to me that I stood in line for the test for 4.5 hours. It was very cold. [...] it was very uncomfortable. (Tomas, 36, mechanic)

The German government acknowledged the importance of CBWs for their economy when implementing their COVID-19 measures. Indirect sources of support for CBWs

came in the form of diplomatic pressure from the German central and federal governments to reopen the border as part of the critical infrastructure, and to reduce the negative impact of the Czech measures.

In contrast, participants described the approaches used by the Czech government as ineffective politicking that increased scepticism in the cross-border commuter community, leading to feelings of distrust regarding the help and support offered by the Czech government. Moreover, participants felt abandoned by their own government because they paid their taxes in a different country. This is evidenced by statement from Pavla (42, nurse):

When the border in the Czech Republic was closed, it was as if a bomb had exploded. I did not know anything, had no idea where and how I could get across the border. I also looked for information and called the German embassy in Prague, but they did not know anything there either – the Czech side had closed the border.

In comparison, when incident numbers in the Czech Republic were higher in the winter of 2020, participants described the intensified border controls from the German side as highly problematic and upsetting. They stated that the combined lack of communication and preparedness at the German border led to waiting times of several hours. Equally, CBWs had several criticisms for the EU. Considering its plea for borders to remain open and its promotion of the idea of a shared market and society, participants expected more support from the EU.

Positioning in Society

While most participants stated their support for the EU, they also criticized the EU for closing borders during the pandemic. They condemned the lack of sufficient preparation and communication, as well as the hostility of politicians and other public figures from the Czech Republic towards commuters. Participants felt strongly about the restrictions and argued that these betrayed the European ideal of open borders. They mentioned their issues understanding the current situation in the light of European laws and the Schengen contract:

I feel like I've lost my freedom all the time during the corona crisis. I think that with it the EU has dismembered (cut into pieces). Each state only plays in its own sand, only protects itself, without thinking that we are in Schengen. But we live in the EU, have valid employment contracts and are forced to adhere to them. (Veronika, 41, service employee)

Participants mentioned that their biggest fear would be a Europe with closed borders and continuous restrictions relating to cross-border mobility. They argued that this would affect their feeling of a mutual society which they felt before the pandemic. This is directly evidenced by reported incidents of xenophobia in the workplace in the host country. Participants described confrontations in which they were falsely accused of transmitting the virus from the Czech Republic to Germany, often resulting in disputes that affected their morale and overall satisfaction:

I had to hear very often in Germany that we as Czechs were bringing the coronavirus to Germany. That annoyed me because I had to be tested for two days and they did not. Sometimes there were disputes among us that made me very uncomfortable. (Tom, 27, mechanic)

Such discrimination was equally evident in the Czech Republic where CBWs were held responsible for bringing the virus back from Germany. Thus, CBWs experienced discrimination from both societies during the pandemic. These prejudices remained in the Czech society even after the border closures were removed and incident numbers decreased in both countries. Several participants confirmed that commuters were constantly blamed from both sides for transmitting the virus from one country to the other as evidenced by Jiří (56, flooring installer):

At home, when I went to the pub, [...] it was made clear to me that we were taking the virus with us from Germany to the Czech Republic. [...] It was a very strange time because I had to listen to the same thing in Germany. [...] In other words, a lot of prejudices really emerged with the pandemic.

These findings support a common perception among CBWs that they do not belong and that nobody cares about their interests. As a result, participants reported negative effects on their trust in society on both sides of the border, and a decrease in life satisfaction and feelings of estrangement in both societies. This is reflective of the fact that CBWs are forced to deal with societal problems that are based on fear, misinformation and even envy from two sides. Some participants mentioned knowing co-commuters that resigned from their jobs during the pandemic because they could not bear this situation any longer. This was made worse due to the general lack of support for CBWs at the time.

Discussion and Conclusion

To explore the work and commuting situation of CBWs between the Czech Republic and Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic, we used the dual-labour market theory (Harrison and Sum, 1979) to contextualize and explore their experience of stress, support, and their position in society. This study extends our limited understanding of the difficulties faced by CBWs in their everyday lives during the pandemic. The situation that evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic shows a significant increase in the challenges faced by CBWs in our sample. The levels of stress faced by study participants was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While this is an observation not unique to CBWs (Haist and Kurth, 2022), their work-related circumstances changed significantly during the crises because of problems faced during their commute, work itself, and a lack of acceptance and support from both the German and Czech governments and society. The process of cross-border commuting, when possible, was a stressor itself that also led to increased levels of stress in other areas of life, especially in the context of work and work–life balance. This was worsened due to uncertainties about the implemented COVID-19 measures, (semi) closed borders, and the highlighted experiences of intimidation and discrimination towards CBWs.

This qualitative exploration adds to the current discussion of inequality in transnational employment and the implications and effects of unethical practices towards international workers (Iossa and Persdotter, 2021; Katic and Ingram, 2018). While such negative effects have been reported previously for different groups of migrants, the problems faced by CBWs between the Czech Republic and Germany have not been evaluated in such depth before (Böhm, 2021; Haindorfer, 2020; Karacsony *et al.*, 2021; Novotný, 2021; Wiesböck, 2016). Our findings demonstrate an inequality in the treatment of CBWs in

terms of finances and job security, but also in their daily lives. This is in line with previous reports of unequal treatment of employees in the secondary sector (Haindorfer, 2020). The experiences of our study participants showcase the mental borders across two societies, which have led to increasing hostility and the subsequent blame and rejection of individuals who are simply making use of their right to free movement (Dhungana, 2020; Karstens, 2020; Nonnenmacher *et al.*, 2021). Our findings support observations made by Haindorfer (2020), confirming the existence of such mental borders and their reinforcement during the pandemic where discrimination was experienced not only in the workplace, but in everyday situations across both societies.

As mentioned previously, CBWs have been forced to simultaneously deal with societal issues based on fear, misinformation and envy from both sides of the border. This emphasizes the general lack of cross-border cooperation and ethical governance (Nadalutti, 2020) that ultimately destroys any feelings of a mutual society that many participants experienced before the pandemic (Capello *et al.*, 2018; Cavallaro and Dianin, 2020; Gerber, 2012; Perkmann, 2003). Moreover, this led to participants feeling that they did not belong to either of the two societies. This is further evidenced by incidents of discrimination from both the German and Czech societies during the pandemic. In comparison to the literature, where discussions focus on topics such as migrants 'stealing' jobs from host-country nationals, identity, and language (Buch *et al.*, 2009; Guo and Al Ariss, 2015; Pires and Nunes, 2018; Wille, 2010), the present situation manifested around accusations that were based on fear and misplaced blame. However, the intensity and frequency of the discrimination described by participants has increased in comparison to previous observations (Wille, 2010).

Considering these experiences, our findings also show an ambiguity when applying the dual labour market theory to CBWs. While several observed factors support the assumptions of the secondary segment (Hirsch, 2016), the dependence of employers on CBWs for keeping their business running and, thus, the need to provide support, has not been previously reported. The dual labour market theory assumes that human capital in the secondary sector is considered to be an exchangeable resource that is characterized by a lack of investment into this human capital (Williams *et al.*, 2001), and a lack of support for employees (Haindorfer, 2013). However, this was not the case in our sample. Despite observing evidence of questionable practices by employers (Dekker and van der Veen, 2017), our participants still described their employers as the most important sources of support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As highlighted by Haak-Saheem *et al.* (2021) such organizational support is often the most crucial yet most absent source of support for individuals employed in low-status occupations. However, this was largely provided to many of our participants. This is particularly interesting, since employment in the secondary segment is typified by poor working conditions and a lack of organizational support (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2013; Haist and Kurth, 2022; Hirsch, 2016). This could be interpreted as a reflection of the stronger power base of CBWs, based on their importance for organizations in the border region compared to other forms of LSEs, especially in times of crisis (Wille, 2010). However, this could also be taken as a sign of a lack of support from external social actors.

Although most study participants support the European ideal of open borders, they criticized the EU for insufficient preparation, lack of support, and the implemented COVID-19 restrictions. They considered these measures as a betrayal on the vision of a

common European society with open borders allowing freedom of movement in line with European laws, and the Schengen contract (Karstens, 2020; Rhinard, 2019). The implemented guidelines for supporting the movement of goods and services across the borders was seen as an unfair prioritization ahead of the interests of actual European citizens (EU Commission, 2020; Felbermayr *et al.*, 2018). These measures did not provide sufficient support to enable CBWs to practice their right of free movement within the EU until several months into the crisis and negatively affected their perception of the EU as a collective identity (European Parliament, 2020; Karstens, 2020).

Our findings highlight key issues in the challenges faced by CBWs, adding further weight to the sense of abandonment felt by CBWs and their distrust in the EU, as well as German and Czech governments. Thus, our findings support previous studies that argue that governments and the chambers of commerce exploit the relatively cheap and well skilled labour from across the border, without having to invest into their attraction and recruitment, due to the economic appeal, as well as the proximity of work and home (Gerber, 2012; Perkmann, 2003; Wiesböck, 2016). The implemented COVID-19 measures showed that the narrative of a united Europe with no borders and free movement was not evident during the crisis and significantly affected the cross-border labour market and cross-border mobility.

Herein, we show that there is a need for a better-connected architecture and regulations that can be used to support free movement and guarantee the ability of European citizens to work across borders (Abad *et al.*, 2018; Novotný, 2021). In addition, this work emphasizes the need to review the situation faced by CBWs and the need to better support their integration into their host society (Böhm, 2021; Buch *et al.*, 2009; van der Bank and Rothmann, 2006). Commuters and employers have struggled with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which poses the question of whether they would survive such a crisis again. Further, this underscores the vulnerability of this workforce and organizations in the border region, both of which require additional support in crisis management and coping with difficult situations (Medeiros *et al.*, 2021; Nonnenmacher *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By evaluating the situation and experiences of CBWs, we enrich and contribute to current discussions in cross-border mobility and the European (dis)integration during the COVID-19 pandemic. We provide a deeper evaluation of the situation faced by CBWs employed in the secondary segment of the labour market, highlighting the difficulties they have experienced because of the implemented COVID-19 measures. Our findings further highlight issues in the social and economic trade-offs found in European cross-border communication and policies (Hantrais, 2021). These findings contribute to the current dialogue around the availability of external sources of support for the international mobile workforce employed in low-status occupations. Moreover, we illustrate the lack of available support for CBWs in both the home and host country, highlighting the challenge in terms of EU labour law obligations. Improved mechanisms are required to support the mobile cross-border workforce (European Parliament, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Wiesböck, 2016) as well as different groups in the secondary segment of the labour market.

This study adds to the discourse surrounding the unequal treatment of individuals across the common labour market in the EU, also reflecting on the ambiguity when

applying the dual labour market theory to CBWs during the COVID-19 pandemic. While our results support findings from previous research showing the difficult, and even unequal employment situations of CBWs in the secondary segment, we also show that CBWs experience significant support from their employers. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been shown in previous studies.

We encourage employers to continue to further improve their support of employees, whilst also endeavouring to tackle discrimination within and outside the workplace. This is important as it may help to improve equality in the workplace, thereby preventing further segregation of the workforce. Furthermore, an improved targeted crisis management strategy that combines employer supplied resources, with resources from governments and non-governmental organizations (for example trade unions and local associations) is necessary to further support CBWs. EU institutions may need to provide protection by responding to issues and miscommunication between the member states (Hantrais, 2021; Nadalutti, 2020). More cross-border cooperation is required to unveil a united Europe especially in times of crises. Bilateral cooperation with neighbouring countries also requires further development to keep the cross-border labour market accessible in times of calamity and to prevent the issues discussed in this study.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study need to be interpreted in the context of its limitations. First, due to the qualitative nature of this research the findings are based on a diverse sample with unique insights into the situation and the experiences of a specific population. However, the sample consisted only of 35 participants. Even if sample size is not considered an issue for this type of research (Saunders and Townsend, 2016), our findings are not generalizable and future research is needed to test these in a larger sample. Further insights could also be achieved by using a comparative ex-ante, ex-post research approach. Second, our findings are based on CBWs from the Czech Republic as a single country. Further studies could extend the focus to other states within the EU to evaluate the situation of CBWs and compare their findings to the present research. In light of the present conclusions we encourage future research to develop theoretical frameworks in the context of cross-border management in times of crises that could help social actors to support CBWs (Leschke and Weiss, 2020). To achieve this, border studies must be enhanced with concepts from management and global mobility (for example the Expatriate Crisis Framework or the process model of social adjustment) (Farh *et al.*, 2010; McNulty *et al.*, 2019).

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