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# Market-reach into social reproduction and transnational labour mobility in Europe

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## ABSTRACT

What are the processes and consequences of markets reaching deeper into social reproduction? How do these developments, in the context of Europeanisation underpinned by neoliberalisation and transnationalisation, compel labour mobility? To consider these questions we apply social reproduction theory and the framework of uneven and combined accumulation of capital in Europe to the analysis of the UK, Poland and Ukraine and their food production, housing construction and care provision sectors.

We explore how transformations, in these three countries interconnected by labour mobilities and in these three domains key to social reproduction, not only affect the industries that supply food, housing and care, but, crucially, redraw the contours of social reproduction. Theorising social reproduction as a continuum of market, state and household provisioning, we outline its transformation within the specific constellation of Europeanisation and delineate how mobility is both propelled by and advances market-reach into food, housing and care. We argue that market-driven transnational social reproduction is constituted by contradictions stemming from the deepening subordination of reproductive labour to the law of value, progressively depriving households of the promise of prosperity - a complex process that is made visible by our feminist critique of political economy.

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## Introduction

What does a box of blueberries grown on a farm in Poland, picked by a Ukrainian seasonal worker, transported by a Polish truck driver, sold by an English supermarket cashier, purchased by an English, Polish or Ukrainian customer in London and consumed by their household tell us about contemporary Europe? As we demonstrate throughout this paper, this story of the movement of goods, services and people to provision food, as well as housing and care, conveys *market-driven transnational social reproduction* mobilised by political, economic and domestic transformations. First, it signifies a reconfiguration of the state-market relationship, whereby European integration, as a project primarily oriented to improving competitiveness (Bieler and Morton 2001, van Apeldoorn 2003), has entailed the contradiction between a redistributive European Social Model and economic growth and efficiency (Scharpf 2002). Second, it reflects household change, especially gender relations

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led by women assuming a prominent role in employment (Rubery *et al.* 2005) and in transnational migration (Kofman and Raghuram 2015). Finally, it presents the reality of east-to-west movement of workers increasing since the 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU),<sup>1</sup> a process integral to the transformations of the political, economic and domestic spheres.

Mainstream and critical political economy research does not analyse changes to production, exchange, consumption and social reproduction in an integrated manner. Europeanists tend to explore state-market relations through analytically distinguishable institutions and policies mediating the contradictions of capital and class (Scharpf 2002, Streeck 2014, Bonefeld 2017), highlighting logics of integration (Rosamond 2016) and examining EU-member states' political and economic alignments that increase the role of transnational markets (Jacoby 2010, Bruszt and Vukov 2017). Households as agents of socioeconomic change and gender as a core structural social relation tend to feature in separate analyses of social change in Europe. Gender scholarship investigates work and family patterns (Crompton and Lyonette 2006), regulating gender equality in employment (Fagan and Rubery 2018), mainstreaming gender into politics and policies (Cavaghan 2017), and conceptualising the EU as a gender regime (Walby 2004). Additionally, households feature in inquiries into the drivers and scale of labour mobility (Kahanec and Zimmermann 2016), tensions with national welfare states (Geddes and Hadj-Abdou 2016), links to labour market and welfare state regulations (Ruhs and Palme 2018), economic costs and benefits of migration (Martinsen and Pons Rotger 2017) and domestic work and care (Lutz 2016). By and large, however, migration scholarship has treated labour mobility as a political or economic process, where migrants pursue interests in step with or outpacing policy and receiving and sending countries manage mobility with labour market aims in mind.

These interventions, despite numerous points of connection and the vital role of households alongside markets and states, fail to incorporate the domestic with the political and the economic in a gender-sensitive manner. Conversely, feminist scholarship's emphasis on social reproduction as integral to political economies at the national, international and global levels (Elson 1998, Bakker 2007, Hoskyns and Rai 2007, Fraser 2016) underlines how domestic work and care form the core of life-making provisioning through unpaid or paid activities, some of which occur transnationally, and how the reproduction of labour is central to value appropriation. In particular, Diane Elson's (1998) framework accounts for the reproduction of the social conditions of production of value through three circuits – domestic, political and economic – within a national economy. However, conceptualising social reproduction requires a twofold extension which we develop and operationalise in this article. First, the biological and intergenerational reproduction of life depends on additional necessities besides care, with food and housing being the most obvious other requirements. Second, whereas global processes of market liberalisation, welfare state retrenchment and household responsabilisation have strained social reproduction everywhere (Bakker 2007, Fraser 2016), market-reach into social reproduction (Fraser 2014) has varied locally (Bakker and Gill 2019), even within a highly integrated Europe. Building on these insights, we extend social reproduction theorising as a continuum of transnational provisioning of food, housing and care goods and services by households, states and markets.

Our main aim is to understand the ways in which markets reach deeper into social reproduction and, because economic and political processes are constituted by uneven and combined Europeanisation (specifically neoliberalisation and transnationalisation), how these encourage transnational labour mobility. Labour mobility, in this context, is an essential aspect of provisioning, as food, housing and care are subjected to market competition, exerting a downward pressure on the households' wage-earning capacity. We focus on food, housing and care because they are key to reproducing life and their social organisation forms the basis for the reproduction of labour. Furthermore, these domains are unevenly subjected to commodification, marketisation and financialisation tendencies, variedly exposed to transnational labour mobility, and comprise differentially gendered activities. To assemble the puzzle of market-reach and the role of transnational labour mobility in it, we explore the dynamics and local constellations of these three domains in Ukraine, Poland

and the UK in the two decades to 2020. These countries are connected by large-scale labour mobilities (Plomien and Schwartz 2020), with Poland being the second-largest country of origin (1.7 million) and the UK the second-top destination (2.6 million) of EU mobile workers (EC 2021a), and Ukraine the largest external country of origin of workers in the EU (with over 2.8 million work-permits issued between 2014 and 2019) and Poland being their main destination (Dubenko and Kravchuk 2021). Recent events, including Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, have unsettled but not dislodged the logic of labour mobility as an aspect of social reproduction.

We proceed by developing a social reproduction framework for a gender-sensitive understanding of the political economy of Europeanisation, within which the domestic sphere is rendered prominent by the households' entanglement in transnational labour mobility. We then focus empirically on the transformation of states, markets and households in Ukraine, Poland and the UK, before examining food, housing and care provisioning in these countries. We conclude by charting analytically the ways in which markets reach into social reproduction, including by encouraging transnational labour mobility, as a self-reinforcing (if contested) cycle that underpins Europeanisation.

### **Social reproduction, the provisioning mix, and uneven and combined Europe**

Marxist feminists have theorised the gendered life-sustaining activities as being simultaneously necessary for and contradictory to the production and appropriation of surplus value in capitalism (see Bhattacharya 2017, Winders and Smith 2019). Social reproduction entails the daily and intergenerational biological reproduction and care work required in the making of people, and the production of goods and services essential to reproducing material life and social relations. It is an 'indispensable background condition for the possibility of economic production' (Fraser 2016, p. 102), giving society its specific form (Elson 1994, Ferguson 1999). While social reproduction furnishes the basis of all societies, capitalism presupposes the reproduction of social relations for the appropriation of surplus value. Capitalist production requires agents with volition, abilities and skills generated outside it, but the 'shadowy, unquantifiable, and (technically) valueless domestic' activities that reproduce and replenish workers (and non-workers) that create value are neglected (Vogel 2000, p. 162). At the same time, reproductive activities 'cannot function and sustain themselves without an input of money; and they are reshaped in response to the power of money' (Elson 1994, p.40). The invisibility and devaluation of reproductive versus productive work entrenches inequality (Elson 1994, Vogel 2000) that intersects with class and racialisation (Glenn 1992, Ferguson and McNally 2015) across transnational borders (Truong 1996, Kofman and Raghuram 2015) and generates value through wageless or informal work (Mezzadri 2019).

Production and social reproduction are integrated into a unified, but not uniform, social process (Glucksmann 1995, Truong 1996), with interlocking activities and causal directions moving both ways (Humphries and Rubery 1984), taking on historically specific forms (Bezanson and Luxton 2006). As periods of stability intertwine with crises and 'struggles over the conditions for the reproduction of the commodity labour power' (Vogel 2000, p. 163; Fraser 2016), we see more distinctly the interdependence of economic, political and domestic spheres (Elson 1998). In the economic sphere, markets reorganise production, including through technological innovation and labour restructuring. In the political sphere, states reform policies, including finance, taxation, trade, welfare, labour and migration. In the domestic sphere, households reshape their consumption and production activities, including paid and unpaid work, within the parameters of market and state provisioning for their reproductive needs. As a result, the 'conflictive relationship between the imperatives of capitalism and the necessities of material life' (Bakker 2007, p. 543) delineates the balance between the economic, the political and the domestic.

The restructuring of the private and public sectors through flexibilisation of labour markets, privatisation of public assets, and disinvestment from social services means that 'capitalist market relations increasingly infiltrate social reproduction' (Bakker 2007, p. 541). The deterioration of

employment conditions and wages, on the one hand, and of the public provision of welfare goods and services, on the other, push more people into paid labour. With corporate tax cuts and austerity policies weakening social insurance against market risks and diminishing state provision of social welfare, households come under greater stress to generate incomes. However, labour market flexibilisation, expanding part-time, insecure and low-wage employment, preclude the satisfaction of reproduction needs. Moreover, women's aspiration and increased participation in paid work has been eclipsed by the compulsion to generate wages without adequately replacing their hitherto unpaid domestic work. Market proliferation and intensification occurs via commodification, subjecting products or services previously supplied unpaid to money exchange; via marketisation, transferring publicly held goods to the private sector or pursuing efficiency by extending market processes and actors; and via financialisation, subordinating the commodity economy to financial speculation wherein goods and services are converted into tradable assets. Such deep reach of markets into non-commodified life increases strain on social reproduction while simultaneously diminishing household capacity to meet needs, mitigating against which mobilises gender and class intersecting with geographical unevenness (Plomien and Schwartz 2020).

Because social reproduction is constituted by the contradictory and contested relationship between markets, states and households, the relative dominance of any one sphere determines the provisioning mix. States have extensively shaped social reproduction because the social demands to counter periodic falls in profit rate, overaccumulation, overproduction, under-consumption and mass unemployment have required commensurate social policies (Clarke 1991). Yet, since policies represent the intercession of multiple contradictions between capital and labour, addressing social problems arising from these contradictions can only reach temporary compromises and displacements (Holloway and Picciotto 1977, Hirsch 1978). With the deepening integration of Europe following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, and the strengthening of the coordination of countries' budgetary and macroeconomic reforms after the 2008 financial crisis (EC 2015a), the EU has become a state facet through which common regulations and institutions impose a 'regime of liberty' (Bonefeld 2017). The progressive alignment of the economic and monetary policies of EU member states and the fiscal, deficit and debt convergence of Eurozone countries have harnessed free enterprise and competitiveness over a widening range of social processes (Bonefeld 2017). The role and scope of social policy has been redefined by the expanding proportion and centrality of markets in the social reproduction provisioning mix.

The EU has also influenced the economic, political and domestic spheres in states in its neighbourhood, lodging them within an uneven and combined Europe comprised of 'systemically produced geoinstitutional differentiation' (Brenner *et al.* 2010, p. 207, Becker and Jäger 2012). Asymmetric integration has proceeded by extending internal market rules and freedoms of movement (of capital, goods, money and people) to European Economic Area countries, and by committing candidate or associate countries (including Ukraine) to pursue EU-benchmarked reforms. The disparity between economic integration and market liberalisation federated to the EU, and social protection and equality policies relegated to nation states and their social (class, gender, ethnic, etc.) struggles has generated not only a 'constitutional asymmetry' (Scharpf 2002), but real variegation of social reproduction (Bakker and Gill 2019).

The move away from the 'Keynesian-Beveridgean state' that insures against market risks through public provisioning, towards the 'competition state' (Jessop 1993, Cerny 1997, Hay 2004a) that seeks to develop workers' capabilities to embrace markets for shoring up prosperity, involves social reproduction. From deeming markets as generating social problems for policy to redress, to deeming people as needing policy to adjust to markets, material security is closely aligned with work-readiness and market wages. Market, rather than public and household, provisioning is thus construed as preeminent in social reproduction. The aspiration to widen entrepreneurialism as the plank of economic activity is operationalised through, for example, activation (Bonoli 2010), life-long learning (Borg and Mayo 2005), flexicurity (Lewis and Plomien 2009) and work-life balance (Stratigaki 2004) policies. Attaining the well-being of Europe's economy is aligned with the well-being of the

entrepreneurial spirit – being inventive, self-reliant, mobile and ready to adjust to price signals. Such policies, however, cannot resolve social problems or intervene in the social structure, because they advance market-based economic order, the alternative to which is not on the political agenda (Bonefeld 2017). Rather, the EU's quest to achieve a 'highly competitive social market economy' (EU 2012) aims to deliver security and sustainability by means of, not despite, markets. Households, thus, emerge as critical actors in the political and economic processes of European integration, while states and markets precipitate profound changes in households' social reproduction. We integrate these insights into our analytical framework for examining market-driven transnational social reproduction through a mix of state, market and household provisioning in an uneven and combined Europe.

## The economic, the political and the domestic in the UK, Poland and Ukraine

The integration of Ukraine, Poland and the UK into the global economy, with a shared ecology of trade, capital and labour flows, has reconfigured their economic, political, and domestic spheres. Neoliberalisation policies, characterised by a faith in market efficiency, labour market flexibility and welfare reforms encouraging market participation (Hay 2004b, Jessop 2004), have been adopted in all three countries. The UK's market liberalisation of the 1980s was a response to the crisis of the 1970s and Poland and Ukraine's reforms since 1989 and 1991, respectively, were an extension of the political and economic freedoms pursued since the collapse of state-socialism. While the UK today is a centre of international finance, legal and corporate services, and high value manufacturing, competitive pressures have induced cost-reduction, employer-led flexibility, and low-wage employment. Restructuring has generated social reallocations, deskilling and reskilling, and reshaped the gendered division of labour, with more women entering employment (McDowell 2001, Rubery *et al.* 2005). Poland's 'shock therapy' and enterprise privatisation of the early 1990s improved productivity and technological upgrading, but plant closures and surging unemployment, followed by workforce flexibilisation, 'junk contracts' (Czarzasty *et al.* 2014, Drahokoupil and Piasna 2018), low-tax Special Economic Zones and westward profit transfers (Domański 2003, Piketty 2019) as part of EU accession have cemented uneven accumulation. Ukraine began from a similar position to Poland's, but oligarchic power and oscillation between the EU and Russia impeded reforms and investment, bringing industrial decline, low-wages, informality, underemployment and multiple-job holding (Mykhnenko and Swain 2010, Yurchenko 2018). Following a decade of relative stability and growth, Ukraine suffered a severe crisis caused by Russia's 2014 invasion, magnified by the 2022 full-scale war.

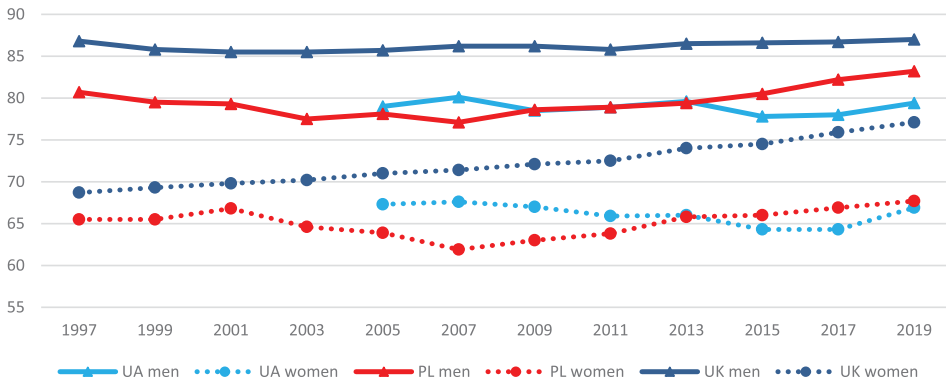
Despite converging growth patterns, standards of living continue to vary across Europe, with eastern European incomes being about 35 per cent below average (Blanchet *et al.* 2019). By 2019, average GDP per capita (PPS in international dollars at constant prices) among 46 European countries exceeded 37,000, but Poland (at 33,000) placed below average and Ukraine (under 13,000) was second poorest while the UK (over 46,000) ranked among the more affluent (IMF 2020). Crucially, the division of national income between labour and capital has changed since the 1990s, with the wage share of productivity growth falling in favour of rising profits (ILO 2016), shadowing a secular decline in the incomes of low- and medium-skilled workers and a rise for the high-skilled and managers (ILO/OECD 2015). Income inequality within countries rose since the late 1980s, with Poland experiencing the highest inequality growth in Europe (10 per cent of its earners capture over 37 per cent of the national income), and Ukraine and the UK trailing closely (10 per cent capturing 35 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively) (Blanchet *et al.* 2019, WID 2021).

Public provision has become decentralised and individualised in scope, content and mode of delivery, with welfare policy geared towards promoting employment. EU-influenced employment and gender equality reforms have benefitted large segments of the workforce in the UK and in Poland, but activation programmes have subordinated welfare-enhancing aspects of employment to competitiveness objectives through low-wage and insecure job proliferation (Dolowitz 1997, Plomien 2009, Zbyszewska 2016, Fagan and Rubery 2018). Despite numerous attempts (Adamczyk

2016), Ukraine has not achieved comparable activation, with 35–40 per cent of the population deriving income from the informal economy (Muzychenko 2018), while minimum wage, working time and social protection regulations remain inadequate (Lehmann and Pignatti 2018, Czaplinski and Dzhaman 2019), notwithstanding its ratification of ILO conventions (EC 2015b).

Benefits not enhancing employability have been restricted and universal programmes replaced with means-testing, thus, despite stable or growing expenditure, social rights may still be *de jure* and *de facto* undermined, as with outsourcing services to for-profit providers or benefits subsidising wages (Cunningham and James 2009). The UK's cuts to housing, health and social care, education, disability, public pensions and income support for lone mothers (Jessop 2004, Lewis and Surender 2004, Clasen 2005) have come with expanding market principles and via market providers (Grimshaw and Rubery 2015). Poland's income support to working-age population was halved between 1991 and 2009 (Adema *et al.* 2014), and social protection spending as a proportion of GDP remains comparatively low. Sickness, healthcare and disability expenditure has declined throughout the 2000s to 5.5 per cent compared with Ukraine's 7.6 per cent and the UK's 9.9 per cent (Eurostat 2022a, 2022b), with underfunding and private sector expansion worsening health inequalities (Golinowska 2019) in-line with Europe-wide trends (Baeten *et al.* 2018). Housing and social exclusion expenditure commands a meagre 0.1 per cent (compared with 1.7 per cent in the UK), even as spending on family and children increased from 0.9 per cent in 2005 to 2.5 per cent in 2018 (compared with cuts from 3.2 to 2.3 per cent in the UK) (Eurostat 2022a). Yet, the market-driven investment in childcare services (discussed below) and child benefits from 2016 have encouraged re-familialisation, exacerbating gender and class inequalities by disincentivising mothers in low-income households from employment (Plomien 2019, Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2021). Ukraine's public provisioning has been more fragile. Benchmarking to EU standards, formalised by the 2014 Association Agreement and underpinned by conditional macro-financial assistance from the EU, IMF and World Bank, has triggered policies on the functioning of markets, property rights and reducing 'regulatory burdens' (EC 2020, p. 25, EC 2021b). Though adopted after resistance in Ukrainian parliament (Adamczyk 2016), reforms reduced public services by 30 per cent, cutting public employees' benefits, rationalising state agencies, and diminishing capacity in the face of war-related assistance to over one million internally displaced persons (EC 2015b). Despite real wage growth in 2016–2019, decent work deficit, unemployment, wage poverty, workplace inequality and poor public services (ETUC 2021) meant that one-third of the population obtained below subsistence minimum incomes (World Bank 2020).

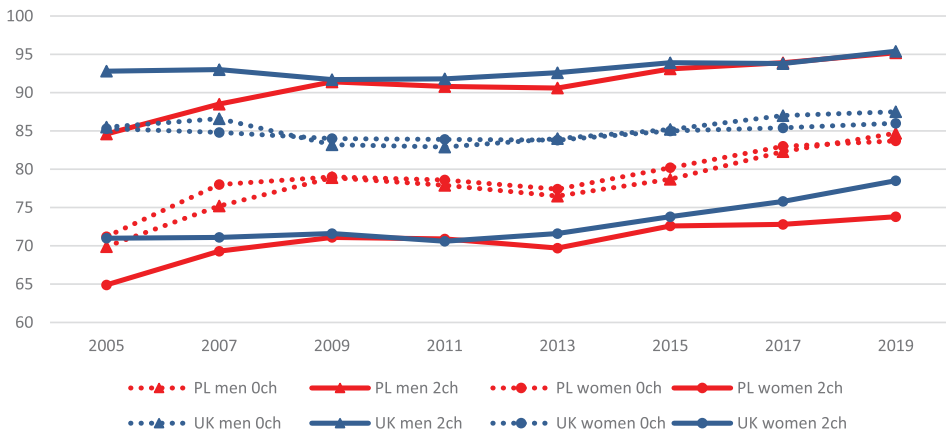
By 2018, cuts in social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP were steepest in Ukraine (from 31.2 in 2012 to 17.5), followed by the UK (from 28.5 in 2010 to 25.7), and Poland (from 21 in 2016 to 19.7) (Eurostat 2022a). Reductions have varied, with UK public provisioning remaining more generous vis-à-vis Poland and Ukraine, as a result of which households in the three countries have adjusted in distinct ways. For example, daily time-use for core housework (cooking, cleaning, clothes-care) in the UK and in Poland has been falling for women and increasing for men since the 1960s (Altintas and Sullivan 2016, Eurostat 2022a). These trends suggest that more of the domestic work has become market-mediated in one form or another, either through more appliances, new technological and organisational solutions, or more goods and services being purchased. Tellingly, cutting time-use on food management accounts for more than half of the change for Polish and nearly a third for British women (the second largest category after cleaning), whereas men's largest timesaving derives from reducing construction and repairs in both countries (Eurostat 2022a), underscoring that while housework has declined for men and women, its gendered division has undergone limited modification. Household characteristics dampen this decline, as for 25–44-year-olds housework time decrease is offset by childcare time increase, except for men in the UK. While no comparable data exists for Ukraine, a recent study (UNFPA 2018) incorporating men's reports of their and their partners' time-use indicates similarly gendered patterns, but more time spent on housework.



**Figure 1.** Activity rates in Ukraine, Poland and the UK, 20–64 years old. Source: Eurostat (2022a, 2022b).

Rising labour market participation of women (Figure 1) has been especially strong in the UK, increasing 8.5 p.p. over two decades. In Poland, women’s advancements have narrowed the gender employment gap. In Ukraine there has been little change, partly reflecting the difficult labour market conditions discussed above. A revealing indication of the increased role of markets in mediating social reproduction is the commodification of women’s labour evident in mothers’ employment rates (Figure 2). Among women with two children in the UK the growth rate is striking (8 p.p. in the decade since 2011), whereas in Poland it tapers off after child-benefit reforms.

These transformations of the mix of inputs from markets, states and households fundamentally change social reproduction. Households have had to respond to states increasingly proffering markets as a social policy proxy, becoming more profoundly enmeshed in the production and appropriation of surplus value at the expense of meeting social needs. As public provision is retrenched, households must replenish through private means. However, household provisioning, demanding the input of time and money (Elson 1994), has also become truncated. As more of the goods and services become subject to markets, new expenses compel households to increase their income-generating capacity, but growing employment insecurity limits wages and overcoming these limits promotes labour market feminisation. Importantly, the reshaping of the economic, political and domestic spheres encourages transnational labour mobility, largely explaining Europe’s east-to-west movement of workers (where 13 million EU and 16.6 million ‘third country’ nationals, including Ukrainians, constitute a significant part of the workforce (EC 2021a)), and how Europe’s households are drawn into and affected by transnational labour.



**Figure 2.** Employment rates in Poland and the UK by presence of children, 25–49 years old. Source: Eurostat (2022a).



## Market-reach into food, housing and care provisioning

Examining food, housing and care as key aspects of social reproduction substantiates the transformations of the market, state and household provisioning mix. Food comprises the second largest household expenditure after housing in the EU – 17 per cent in the UK and 23 per cent in Poland (FoodDrinkEurope 2020), and in Ukraine it accounts for 48.5 per cent (Mostenska *et al.* 2022). Spending has shifted away from home cooking ingredients towards semi-prepared and restaurant meals. In Poland, expenditure on the latter increased 3.4 times in real terms, and its proportion in household budgets rose from 4.1 to 15.6 per cent between 2000 and 2015 (Świetlik 2017). Increased consumption of ready-made meals and take-aways in Polish households (CBOS 2000, CBOS 2014, IPSOS 2021) coincides with a 34 per cent growth of food production between 2010 and 2017 (PARP 2020), and in the EU prepared meals production has grown about 30 per cent between 1990 and 2015 (Eurostat 2022a). Twenty-three million people are employed in EU's agriculture, food manufacturing and sales, with food processing firms, representing 14.2 per cent of all manufacturers, growing substantially in turnover terms (FoodDrinkEurope 2020). While most are small, a few global corporations account for 56 per cent of the total value added, and three largest companies dominate the European single market (Van Dam *et al.* 2021). Large packaged-food and prepared meals manufacturers, supermarkets, fast food restaurants and delivery services determine the food environment, prices, consumption, and labour markets and working conditions, all of which impact social reproduction.

Developments in European agriculture have extended markets into social reproduction in specific ways. While improving efficiency has been a priority of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, one of its effects has been farming intensification and ownership concentration. Between 2005 and 2016 the number of farms nearly halved in the UK and Poland (Eurostat 2022a), as the volume of the EU's agricultural output grew (Eurostat 2021). Large farms (over 100ha) utilise disproportionate areas of land – in Poland less than 1 per cent of the holdings utilise 21 per cent of agricultural areas, whereas in the UK 21.6 per cent of the holdings utilise 75 per cent (Eurostat 2018). As a result, more former producers take up wage labour, in agriculture and other sectors, while larger farms competing for market share drive down wages and reduce employment. This dynamic means that, on the one hand, efficiencies generated by concentration enable households to access food, including ready-made meals, at more affordable prices, saving them time and freeing them to earn wages necessary for a wider range of goods and services available only via the market. On the other hand, for those employed in food production, competition means that pay and conditions deteriorate, preventing households from earning incomes high enough to afford them.

Securing adequate housing is increasingly difficult for households across Europe. Growth in property prices and shortage of affordable rental accommodation has resulted from policies aimed at privatising public housing and encouraging ownership in the UK since the 1980s and in Ukraine and Poland since the 1990s. In Ukraine, after early mass privatisation, home ownership reached 83 per cent by 2019, while public and employer-owned housing declined to 6 per cent and private rentals increased to 8 per cent (Fedoriv and Lomonosova 2019). By 2019 home ownership in Poland reached 84.2 per cent, while private renting stood at 13.6 per cent (EC 2021c). In the UK, home ownership reached an all-time high of 70.9 per cent in 2003 before declining to 65 per cent in 2018 (Corlett and Gardiner 2018, EHS 2021). In England, nearly 20 per cent of dwellings were privately rented in 2020, but only two regions (East Midlands and the North-West) were affordable for households at the lower income quartile (ONS 2021). Higher home ownership in Ukraine and Poland, however, does not equal greater economic security or the satisfaction of shelter needs. Indeed, the incidence of homeowners' economic hardship is higher in eastern than in western European countries, and households cannot maintain their, often unfit, dwellings properly (Mandič 2010, Shcherbyna 2022).

Market domination in the housing sector has not matched supply with demand amid rising prices. In the last 40 years, prices in the UK have increased, while housebuilding has fallen

(Jefferys *et al.* 2014). With decline in output, the share of housing supplied by private companies increased from 52 per cent in 1968 to 85 per cent by 2016 (Murphy 2018). Simultaneously, market reaches into housing in more profound ways – through mergers and acquisitions and the leveraging of company debt in stock market speculation or through financialisation, where registered providers, such as housing associations, transfer privatised public housing to equity firms as investment collateral (Aalbers *et al.* 2017, Fields 2017). In contrast, housing construction in Poland has been more dynamic. In the decade since 2010, the number of construction firms increased by 42.5 per cent and their labour force by 18.1 per cent (EC 2021c) on the back of state programmes encouraging ownership (MRiT 2022). Consequently, housing stock increased by 1.7 million units, albeit the share built by developers increased from 37.3 to 64.8 per cent and by individual investor-owners fell from 56.2 to 33.4 per cent (MRiT 2022). Nevertheless, needs remain unsatisfied – Poland’s overcrowding rate in 2019 was 37.6 per cent, well above the EU-average of 17.1 per cent (EC 2021c). In Ukraine, despite recent annual price increases of residential housing (CEIC 2021), a similarly strong housing construction market has not emerged, as very high mortgage rates paired with insufficient wage levels and no direct public financing of residential projects have limited effective demand (Shcherbyna 2022).

In all three countries, households struggle to satisfy their shelter needs. Instead, homes take on the function of assets to use as individualised form of welfare enhancement, means of diversifying household income, and insurance against risk (Mandič 2010, Montgomerie and Buedenbender 2015). The substitution of publicly-funded welfare programmes with the encouragement of asset-based welfare strategies presupposes uninterrupted employment, secular income increases, stable savings and mortgage repayment, and minimal care needs. Most of these are upended by the reality of inflationary pressures on house prices and wage erosion (Johnston and Regan 2017, Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage 2017), pricing out those who rely on wages.

Care has also been reconfigured through the proliferation of markets, combined with state withdrawal and competing pressures and demands on household wages. In Poland, over two decades care facilities for infants have expanded tenfold (from 428 to 4,574) (GUS 2011, GUS 2021b) raising care-sector employment to 28,534 (from 9,100 in 2012) in addition to over 7,000 registered nannies and day-minders (GUS 2013, 2021b), as a result of which the proportion of public facilities declined from 97.2 to 21.3 per cent. The adult social care infrastructure exhibits similar, if weaker, trends. Residential facilities have doubled from 936 to 1,851 mostly accomplished by non-governmental and commercial providers and the public share falling from 57 per cent in 2005 to 41 per cent in 2020 (GUS 2021c). Ukraine’s social care is poorly developed, whereas childcare has high attendance rates among 3–5 year-olds at 81 per cent in 2019 (Ukrstat 2020). Its recent introduction of markets and market-mechanisms in childcare parallels Polish reforms (Plomien 2019), encouraging private investment by abandoning strict Soviet-era regulations, effectively lowering capital investment costs (MON 2020). Separating state financing from local authority management in 2017 further incentivised growth. Implementing ‘money follows client’ principles, public childcare vouchers are offered to private providers, although the outstanding fees are prohibitive, contributing to overcrowding in public facilities (MON 2020).

The advancement of markets into care provision is most evident in the UK, with its historically extensive social care system undergoing marketisation and financialisation. Following the 1990 social care reform, local authorities increasingly commissioned services from private providers (Lewis and West 2014). Whereas in 1993 only 5 per cent of England’s publicly funded home care was supplied by the independent (for- and not-for-profit) sector (UKHCA 2013), by 2019 outsourcing increased to 98 per cent (UKHCA 2020). Based on market value, over 90 per cent of nursing care homes and nearly 80 per cent of residential care homes are for-profit (LaingBuisson 2022). The home care, residential and nursing homes are growth-sectors from an ‘investment opportunity’ perspective (LaingBuisson 2021, 2022), yet market expansion has serious consequences. Spending on local authority-arranged care in England remains below 2010 levels since the 55 per cent fall in

government funding and 29 per cent reduction in local authority spending power (NAO 2021) have raised concerns about the sustainability of providers because fees paid to them have been below cost (CMA 2017, ADASS 2021).

Besides deficient public expenditure, market concentration and financialisation pose additional risks. Although the majority of social care is delivered by small businesses, the market share of the top 10 operators is substantial (16 per cent of domiciliary and 22 per cent of care home services) (NAO 2021). The four largest private providers in the UK, responsible for 900 homes and 55,000 residents, have amassed a GBP 2.2 billion debt, the cost of which diverts resources from investing in quality care and facilities (Plimmer 2019). Such a 'debt-laden private investor model' for an essential state-funded service separates assets from services, transferring risk from investors to care providers, workers, and recipients (Horton 2022). As large providers are collapsing (for example, Southern Cross in 2011), put in administration (for example, Four Seasons in 2019) or seek public support (for example, HC-One in 2020), public funds flow out of the sector through executive pay, investor dividends, and real estate asset sales (Plimmer 2019, 2020, 2021). The multi-layered, offshore, private equity ownership structure of these companies obstruct public accountability and governments 'cannot evaluate spending, assess the return on investment nor identify the extent of additional funding needed' (NAO 2021, p. 36). The transformation of care provisioning, away from the welfare state and time-poor households towards markets, leaves either substantial care-needs unmet or requires private solutions to fulfil them. Such solutions rely on and perpetuate inequality, as care workers must be paid low wages for market providers to make profit or for households to afford employing them directly.

These market-reach dynamics across the spectrum of social reproduction drive the demand for migrant workers to fill the void left by non-migrant workers unwilling or unable to accept inadequate working conditions and pay, underpinning the advancement of transnational labour mobility. In 2019 EU migrants constituted 4.3 per cent and non-EU migrants 5.5 per cent of working age (20–64) population across the EU-28 (EC 2021a). In Poland 90 per cent of migrants come from outside the EU (the majority from Ukraine), while in the UK nearly 58 per cent are from the EU (the majority from Poland) (EC 2021a). Food production, housing construction and care provision have become highly reliant on migrant workers, with EU-born migrants in the UK comprising 25 per cent of the workforce in food manufacturing, 20 per cent in construction (30 per cent in London) (Morris 2020), and 7.5 per cent in social care (13 per cent in London) (Skills for Care 2021). In Poland, most migrant worker permits (65 per cent of 504,000 for long-term employment) and employment declarations (82 per cent of 1.9 million for up to 6 months) are granted to Ukrainians mainly in manufacturing, including food processing (23.3 and 35.5 per cent, respectively) and construction (21.9 and 18 per cent, respectively) (MRiPS 2022). Although the share of permits and declarations for agriculture and care work is considerably smaller, agriculture depends on Ukrainian workers (in some regions 48.2 per cent of farms have employed them (NBP 2018)) and informal employment of Ukrainian women in care is estimated at 70,000–100,000 workers (Rogalewski and Florek 2020).

### **Conclusion: contradictions of market-reach into social reproduction as a driver of transnational labour mobility**

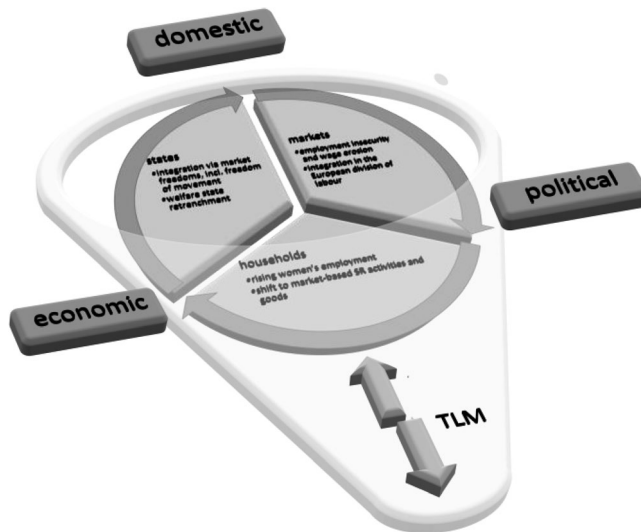
Despite variance, policies favouring markets have delivered food convenience and affordability, expansion of privately owned housing, and more childcare and social care facilities. The same policies have brought inadequate earnings and working conditions, so that any benefits to British, Polish and Ukrainian households have been exchanged for more time spent in (insecure) employment, shortage of affordable housing and excessive debt, and insufficient quantity and quality of care. States have set the regulatory framework such that markets delineate the level of provisioning on which households rely, compelling transnational labour mobility as an active measure towards meeting social reproduction needs. In the context of inequalities across Europe, both within and between national political economies, mobility is leveraged by workers seeking to improve social

reproduction in the face of diminishing state provisioning and resource shortfalls, including time and money, and by companies fuelling markets due to opportunities provided by national and EU policies. Similar forces prompting migration globally are activated by colonial legacies (Hooghe *et al.* 2008) or various regional treaties (Ferguson and McNally 2015). The resultant tendencies towards commodification, marketisation and financialisation in social reproduction, exemplified through food, housing and care, have contributed to the erosion of the value of reproductive labour (relative to non-market-based social arrangements) while raising the price of reproductive goods and services. The emphasis of European regulation on freeing labour and enterprise within a policy constellation of market incentives and penalties, has weakened social security, compelled transnational labour mobility and accelerated market-reach into social reproduction.

We have sought to capture these dynamics by illustrating how policies pursued in the UK, Poland and Ukraine have variously brought them into a shared ecology, in which the mix of provisioning from states, markets and households has shifted towards markets. The unique position of food, housing and care at the nexus of production and social reproduction, has allowed us to reveal a dual manoeuvre. On the one hand, as markets reach deeper into the business of food, housing and care, they subject producers to greater competitive pressures, forcing them to reduce wages and employment and restructure labour in line with value generation imperatives. On the other hand, households are put under stress to earn wages to pay for goods and services previously excluded from market competition. The seeming upshot of households reaping better value from reduced production costs, and the freeing of their members from domestic labour to participate in paid employment is, nevertheless, trumped by the dampening of wages. The downside, then, is the households' increased efforts to secure sufficient wages to meet expanding social reproduction needs. The dominance of markets and market mechanisms refashions and reinforces the social processes and experiences of class and gender divisions, as competition and profit maximisation override redistribution and equality objectives.

This is the essence of market-reach into social reproduction. Low wages and poor working conditions in food, care and housing, as its key consequence, account for the inability of many workers to take up such jobs because their marketised social reproduction needs cannot be met by the market-determined pay. In an uneven and combined Europe, where unequal costs of living and unequal incomes coexist within the legal framework of the freedom of movement, transnational labour mobility presents itself as an advantageous option. Labour mobility brings non-migrant and migrant households in the UK, Poland and Ukraine in relation with one another through market-dependent social reproduction, either because workers from lower wage labour markets seek more favourable conditions abroad or because non-migrant households must rely on migrant labour to meet their own needs under similar strain. For Ukrainian households, it is as workers and as family members of those who move. Polish households are doubly implicated, first as transnational workers and their families, and second as non-migrant households benefiting from the substitute labour of Ukrainian workers. British households are affected through migrant workers performing many low-paid, demanding or seasonal jobs, which allows non-migrant households to furnish aspects of social reproduction more affordably.

The significance of our analysis lies in seeing that the tendency to turn society into 'commodities all the way down' (Fraser 2014) contains contradictions, chief of which is that by subordinating more reproductive labour to market transactions, capital, as a social relation, is progressively deprived of the value-generating capacity needed for its reproduction (Elson 1998. Vogel 2000). Although neither European integration nor markets in everyday life *per se* conflict with households' desire to meet social reproduction needs, their contemporary character undermines adequate provisioning of food, housing and care. Likewise, the ability to move freely and seek work that is more advantageous is less in question than the form these take in an uneven and combined Europe, which accelerates markets in social reproduction for both migrant and non-migrant households. Furthermore, while gender equality policies have facilitated more women to enter the workforce and influenced changes in gender norms and division of labour, the fact that such changes are subject to markets as



**Figure 3.** Anchorage of transnational labour mobility in market-driven social reproduction.

a form of compulsion fails to secure adequate provision of food, housing and care, representing a struggle between the promise of freedom and equality, and the reality of want, inequality and depletion.

By drawing together social reproduction theory and scholarship on the state and political economy of Europeanisation, we establish the dynamics of market-reach into social reproduction and their role in transnational labour mobility (see [Figure 3](#)), speaking to problems signposted at the start of the article. The interconnection between economic, political and domestic spheres ([Elson 1998](#)) enables, firstly, the centring of households in the political economy and, secondly, the understanding of social reproduction as not primarily the purview of the domestic sphere, where households are the loci of provisioning outside of, or auxiliary to, capitalist production and appropriation of value. Rather, the domestic exists as coequal of the economic and political spheres, wherein households, markets and states, in concert with the existing gender order and division of labour, shape the rules and the scope of social reproduction provisioning. Consequently, the- orising social reproduction (and households) as constitutive of and, concomitantly, by the political economy, allows, thirdly, the modes of market-reach (via, variously, commodification, marketisation or financialisation) in food, housing and care to be seen as a continuum of processes by which different spheres of reproduction/production are interlinked across localities. Transnational labour mobility provides a respite to non-migrant households requiring better provisioning. Insofar as it exists as a dynamic of competition, however, it suspends or relinquishes social reproduction of migrant households ([Plomien and Schwartz 2023](#)), causing a downward trajectory and social harms ([Plomien and Schwartz 2020](#)). This challenges the view of transnational labour mobility, prevalent in migration studies, as an exterior solution to economic problems (for example, as a *response* to care labour shortages) by emphasising its structural role in market-reach into social reproduction – if transnational labour mobility is a market-driven response, it cannot offer an adequate solution to a market-generated problem.

## Note

1. We distinguish between the EU, its supranational institutions, regulatory framework and member states, and Europe, including countries outside the EU. The UK left the EU on January 31st, 2020; referring to pre-Brexit processes, we include the UK within the EU-28.

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