‘Everyone for themselves’: Non-national EU citizens from Eastern and Central Europe and the 2012 London elections

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Abstract

European Union enlargement has seen a rise of migration within Europe, in particular, from the 2004 A8 and 2007 A2 accession states in eastern and central Europe. At the same time, European integration has created new political rights for non-national European Union citizens (NNCUs) in local and European elections. Across the UK, the number of NNCUs registered to vote has more than doubled over the past decade. In London, official figures show around 450,000 of these European ‘movers’ comprised nearly 8 per cent of the total electorate in 2010. Migrants from the A8 and A2 member states, in particular from Poland, are an increasingly significant number of these potential voters. This paper presents qualitative interview data from fieldwork with Polish, Czech, Slovak and Lithuanian citizens living in London. Against the background of the London mayoral and assembly elections in 2012, the paper explores the opportunities and constraints facing these migrant groups to participate in politics. The research examines the social and political attitudes and voting intentions of these new Londoners with a particular focus on how the processes of migration and social integration are shaping these attitudes and helping to forge new political identities and attachments.
Europe's new movers and voters

The number of voters in London elections earlier this year from other European Union member states has never been so high. ‘Non-national citizens of the union’ (NNCUs) now make up around eight per cent of the capital’s electorate - not far short of half a million votes up for grabs. The figure was 159,000 in 2001. This is not just a London phenomenon. Across the UK, the number of NNCUs registered to vote has more than doubled over the past decade (Collard 2011). EU enlargement has driven this new wave of European migration, in particular, from the 2004 A8 (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) and 2007 A2 (Bulgaria and Romania) accession states in eastern and central Europe. More than a million of these new EU citizens have taken the opportunity to move, work and settle in the United Kingdom (Office for National Statistics 2012). Indeed, EU enlargement generally has created the biggest demographic change in Europe since the end of the Second World War - and Britain has been at the centre of this massive movement of people (Favell 2008; Okólski, Kaczmarczyk 2008). Poles have been at the forefront of this new wave of migration to Britain: official figures put the number of Polish nationals living in the UK at 570,000 (ONS 2011), compared to 60,000 in 2000, nearly a tenfold increase. When seasonal and temporary migrants are added to these figures, some estimates put the numbers of Poles working in the UK at well over a million (Pollard 2008). While the economic downturn may have slowed the flow of migrants from Poland and other parts of eastern and central Europe, it has certainly not stopped (Home Office 2010; McCollum and Findlay 2011).¹

Polish migrant have certainly become a potentially more significant element in London elections, as table 1 suggests. Compared to 2008, Poles are now in the top three of largest

¹ According to the Office for National Statistics, the estimated number of citizens from the A8 EU accession states moving to the UK on a long-term basis in the year to September 2011 was 75,000; the estimated number migrating over the same period was 39,000 – neither figure statistically significantly different from the estimates of migration for the year to September 2010 (Migration Statistics Quarterly Report May 2012, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/may-2012/msqr.html)
migrant populations in five London assembly constituencies; and overall, are the third largest migrant population in London.

Table 1: Largest migrant populations by London assembly constituencies

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<tr>
<td>Poles as largest migrant population</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Indian</td>
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<td>Poles as second largest migrant population</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
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<td>Poles as third largest migrant population</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Polish</td>
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Source: London Assembly Constituency Profiles 2012, [link to source](http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Intelligence-Briefing-2012-02-Assembly-Constituency-Profiles-2012.pdf)

As EU enlargement has driven new waves of migration, at the same time, European integration has created new political rights for these European ‘movers’ in local and European elections. While the development of British citizenship law in the post-war period gave formal political rights in local and national elections to both Irish and Commonwealth citizens, similar rights were not extended to other third country nationals. Following the 1992 Treaty on European Union, Council Directive 94/80/EC laid down plans for the extension of political rights to vote and stand as candidates in municipal elections to EU citizens living in a member states of which they were not nationals. The UK, along with Denmark, Ireland and Luxembourg, complied by the 1 January 1996 deadline to have the necessary legislation in place to enact the council directive. Other member states, notably France and Belgium dragged their heels – and France did not hold local elections under the new rules until 2001(Collard 2011).

The combination, then, of the enlargement of the European Union in the 2000s and the extension of political rights to non-national EU citizens under measures to deepen European
integration, has brought the question of the exercise of these rights to the fore. Britain has become familiar with the Polish builder. It now needs to get used to the Pole (and all other non-national EU citizens) at the polling booth.

The political dimension to migration flows from Eastern and Central Europe since 2004 has been studied as part of work on non-national EU citizens (e.g. Collard 2011; see also Shaw 2007); including projects funded by the European Union under its Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme. Otherwise, the attention of academic and policy communities has focused on the economic aspects of migration of these new European citizens including: the impact on the labour market (e.g. Dustman, Fabri 2005; Portes, French 2006; Drinkwater et al 2009) and also the social and cultural life of migrant communities (e.g. White 2010, Garapich 2008, Trevena 2011); the character of transnational networks (Ryan et al 2009); the situation of migrant children (Ryan et al 2011); the emergence of new forms of destitution and homelessness (Garapich 2011); and relationship between new migrants and settled minorities (Temple 2011).

Given the scale of migration from Eastern and Central Europe, and the political rights carried by new migrants in local and European elections, it is perhaps surprising that the literature on the political dimension to this migration is limited. This in part stems from the tendency of much migration scholarship, as well as the public debate more broadly, to treat migrants as predominantly economic actors without any political agency. Indeed, the political dimension of migration too often gets caught in an institutional perspective that sees formal political rights as the pinnacle of the integration process for migrants (Ireland 1994). For A8 and A2 migrants from within the enlarged European Union, these rights are established on entry to the UK.

Understanding political participation among migrant groups

Much of the literature on migration and politics in political science uses the concept of political opportunity structure (e.g. Ireland 1994; for a critique see Bousetta 2000). This, broadly speaking, sees the political environment as a structure shaping the opportunities for

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migrants to participate in politics and, more broadly, society. What follows is that the institutional and cultural configurations in different states will impact on the degree of political integration for migrants. The extent to which migrants have the opportunities to participate in politics in different places will be shaped by the migration regime and the rights granted to minority groups; the legal framework for nationality, citizenship and other economic and social rights (to work and claim welfare, for example); the political and party systems that shape opportunities for political participation; and the cultural climate on immigration that faces migrants wishing to get engaged in politics. These structural factors shaping the opportunities for migrants to participate in politics combine with the group characteristics of migrants and how these impact on their capacities for political mobilisation. Important factors here include: economic and social capital, including language and access to informational resources; the size of migrant populations; and the capacity of migrants to mobilise, in particular, the role of immigrant associations. So, in countries that have multicultural migration regimes backed up by inclusive rules on nationality and citizenship, supported by rights to work and claim social welfare, a party system that encourages representative and diverse electoral strategies and an open and inclusive culture climate on immigration; and where in addition migrant groups themselves are large in number and possess high levels of economic and social capital and have strong mobilising agencies, we would expect to see, in the unlikely case that all these factors did combine in any one place, high levels of political engagement by migrant groups.

For migrants from Eastern and Central Europe post 2004, the political and policy environments have created the structural opportunities for economic, social and political participation. In particular, the decision by the British government to allow the first wave of A8 migrants in 2004 to work and access welfare in the UK under the worker registration scheme – a decision that led the way among EU member states - reflected a broader liberalisation of laws regulating labour market access for third country nationals under the Labour administration after 1997 (Wunderlich 2012). The development of migrants’ rights in the UK over many decades combined with the legal, political and social rights that followed the accession treaties in 2003 and 2005, have created the structural conditions for migrants from eastern and central Europe to have real opportunities to participate in British politics and society.
This legal and policy environment is, of course, important. Without constitutional rights in local and European elections for non-national EU citizens, whether Poles or other eastern and central European nationals living in the UK vote or not, or even how they vote, are largely irrelevant questions. But as this paper explores, while migrants from the A8 and A2 EU accession states have on paper favourable political opportunities to participate in UK local elections, they are not taking up such opportunities. It is certainly the case that these new groups of voters are not being mobilised to a significant extent either by their own immigrant associations or by British political parties – a point we return to at the end of paper. Institutions may be part of the answer to understanding levels of political participation among these new migrant groups.

In seeking to understand levels of political participation among non-national EU citizens from eastern and central Europe in UK politics, as well as the emerging political attitudes of this new electorate, this paper seeks to balance an institutional approach that gives weight to the political context with one that starts with the individual migrant living in a particular local context. Such a methodology draws on the political anthropology of migrant communities and their transnational political activism (e.g. Glick Schiller, et al 1994; Levitt 2000); and focuses on how individual actors make sense of, or give meaning to, specific issues (in this case, their participation in British politics) using their own cultural understandings of the social world around them. The empirical data for such a methodology is found in the discourses, actions, norms and values of a given group of people all of which constitute what Clifford Geertz called the ‘web of meanings’ (Geertz 1973) that inform, legitimise, validate and make sense of people’s actions. While such an anthropological approach precludes an analysis of data generalizable to the whole population, it does none the less help to understand the attitudes and behaviour of social actors within particular social and cultural contexts.

This paper presents qualitative interview data from fieldwork in April 2012 with Polish, Czech, Slovak and Lithuanian citizens living in London. Against the backdrop of the London mayoral and assembly elections in 2012, the paper explores the opportunities and

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3 The study recruited 44 men and women from four EU accession states (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania) through community networks, adverts in the press, businesses and social media. Respondents were chosen on the basis of their education, occupation and minimal interest in the London elections. The focus groups were approximately one and half hours long and were conducted in native languages.
constraints facing these migrant groups to participate in politics. The research examines the social and political attitudes and voting intentions of these new Londoners with a particular focus on how the processes of migration and social integration are shaping these attitudes and helping to forge new political identities and attachments. The paper also draws on election data from the Hammersmith and Fulham in West London, as well as several ethnographic studies carried out by Department of Social Sciences at University of Roehampton among A8 and A2 migrants in London between 2007 and 2011 (Eade et al; Garapich 2007, 2009, 2009a).

Although many features of the mass migration from eastern and central Europe are similar to previous movements of people to Britain over many centuries, there are striking differences. First, significant numbers of the episodes of migration are circular and short-term, with migrants taking advantage of the freedom of movement within the EU. Among the largest group of migrants, for example, a significant number come and go between Poland and Britain; and many have become long-distance commuters rather than typical migrants with the intention of staying for a long time (Drinkwater et al 2009; Pollard et al 2008). Second, these new EU migrants are more widely dispersed around the country than previous mass migrations to the UK (Pollard et al 2008, ONS 2011). Third, this is also a relatively young cohort of migrants with over 80 per cent below the age of 32. In the case of Polish migrants, there is also a higher percentage of people with tertiary education and levels of social capital are high (Sumption 2009, Ryan et al 2009). But despite higher educational and social capital, these new migrants from eastern and central Europe also occupy lower levels of earning ladder; and are employed mainly in construction, service, hospitality, agriculture and manufacturing (Drinkwater et al 2009).

In looking at these new groups of voters in London elections, there is the possibility that urban populations such as London may form a different type of political constituency. In a ‘super-diverse’ (Vertovec 2008) urban setting, the concept of citizenship tied to political membership of the nation state ceases perhaps to be the only point of reference. As Rogers argues:

Current debates on citizenship raise questions about the relationship between membership in some form of community and the formal aspects of citizenship; cities
are the sites of the most profound questions of belonging and identity. The assumption of shared community and culture as the basis for citizenship becomes most problematic in the city. Liberal and universalistic formulations face their strongest challenge from communitarian, neo-republican and identity politics formulations of citizenship. It is in the city that the contradictions between universal and differentiated conceptions of citizenship become most evident (Rogers; 2001: 286).

Given that Polish and other eastern and central European nationals have voting rights in UK local elections as a consequence of their membership of a supra-national polity – they are, after all, non-national EU citizens when living in the UK – the tensions between national and cosmopolitan notions of democracy are brought sharply into focus. Moreover, with the relationship between the UK and the EU remaining uncertain, as well as continuing anxieties about the capacity of multiculturalism to provide the glue to hold Britain’s diverse society together, what the thoughts of this large group of new migrants to the UK is of great interest.

The rest of the paper is divided into three sections. The first examines the question of political participation; the second examines the political attitudes of these new migrant voters; and third section explores these attitudes further, in particular, how they are mediated through the discourse of race. The conclusion raises questions over the political mobilisation of A8 and A2 migrant voters.

**Political participation**

Migrants generally are not the most politically engaged of new citizens. They often face a host of barriers, such as voter registration, language, low political knowledge and the absence of strong mobilising agencies, to exercising democratic rights. The opportunity for migrants from the A8 and A2 accession states to the UK to participate in local elections is provided, as we have seen, by the enactment of Council Directive 94/80/EC. As non-national EU citizens, these new migrants have automatic political rights, although these do not extend to UK national elections.
In Britain, the next step in formal political participation is getting on the electoral roll. While not automatic, this is relatively straightforward. Simply return a card sent annually to all households from the local electoral registration office. If cards are not returned, the local council will, eventually, come knocking. For ambitious migrants, the chance of boosting personal credit ratings is also a good incentive to get on the electoral roll.

Sue Collard’s comparative studies of political participation by non-national EU citizens as a whole suggest that registration rates are much higher in the UK than France: nearly 60 per cent compared to just 20 per cent (Collard 2011). Our own ethnographic studies across a number of London boroughs (Garapich 2007, Garapich, Parutis 2009a, Garapich 2009) included questions on awareness of the right to vote, whether people were registered to vote and their overall willingness to vote. These studies generally involved samples of between 200 and 300 migrants from the most numerous groups – usually Polish, Slovak and Lithuanian. Overall, the general awareness of voting rights was high (in Redbridge, around 70 per cent of the sample were aware of their right to vote; and in Hammersmith and Fulham the figure stood at 78 per cent); actual registration was much lower (26 per cent and 35 per cent respectively); and voting intentions were also quite low (34 per cent and 28 per cent).

Looking at voter turnout, Collard’s research on the 2011 local elections in Brighton and Hove shows a non-national citizens of the union turnout of 23.4 per cent compared with just over 44 per cent for the electorate as a whole (though Collard notes, this second figure was up from 38 per cent in 2007 and was perhaps boosted by the national referendum on the voting system held on the same day). The largest group of NNCUs in this election in Brighton and Hove were Poles, making up 1175 registered voters out of total of 8718 registered NNCUs (the total number of voters was 203,437) (Collard 2011).

Data from our own research from Hammersmith and Fulham in west London points to a similar picture. Using figures from London elections in 2008, turnout among NNCUs was lower than voters as a whole, just over 32 per cent compared to nearly 50 per cent; and turnout among Polish nationals was well down at just under 20 per cent.
Table 2: Voter turnout in Hammersmith and Fulham, 2008 London elections

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<td>All</td>
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<td>49.2</td>
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<td>Non-national EU voters</td>
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<td>32.1</td>
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<td>Polish nationals</td>
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<td>19.9</td>
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Source: Hammersmith and Fulham Council Electoral Office; Federation of Poles in Great Britain

So what might account for the relatively low turnout of Polish voters – and, in all likelihood, eastern and central European nationals more broadly? Our own research was skewed because we asked potential participants to have a basic interest in politics; though, still eight out of 44 participants in the focus groups said they were unlikely to vote – and nine were undecided voters. But despite expressing many firm political views, the participants in our study were, on the whole, a somewhat disengaged group of London voters. While the majority of participants said they would vote, largely out of a sense of civic duty and as proof of their integration into British society, the undecided and the unlikely to vote in this study stressed their lack of political knowledge both of candidates and party programmes, as well as the sense of their ‘novelty in London’. But even among those who were more likely to vote, there was a general self-perception among these new migrants that they were working hard and keeping their heads down: ‘we have very busy lives in this country; you have no time to even watch the news these days’ was a widely held view among the participants. For these new Londoners, one common experience is of ‘everyone for themselves’ precluding time for a broader public discourse of politics.

The relationship between political knowledge and political participation is of course an important one; but it was not the dominant theme that emerged in the focus group discussions around political participation. Indeed, what did come out of the fieldwork was not that these migrants from eastern and central Europe knew too little and cared too little about politics, but that these were a group of Londoners who knew rather a lot about politics not necessarily in the UK but back home in Poland and other eastern and central European states. And it was this experience of post-communist politics that was still shaping attitudes to politics after their arrival in Britain.
For this group of voters, then, the fact of migrating from another country to the UK is significant: they have brought something of their past into their present lives in Britain. Part of this baggage of migration is the legacy of undemocratic government and political corruption ‘back home’. This is a group of voters who, in different ways, are wary of the state and see it as essentially hostile to its citizens – and is certainly not an institution that might be trusted to provide welfare and other public goods. As one Polish participant observed: ‘Polish politics is as it is... it is different here, but one got burned by politics in Poland and I do not want to get involved’.

This ‘it is different here’ should not be ignored. The lack of trust in the state that these migrants carry with them from their countries of origin is not, perhaps rather paradoxically, transferred to political institutions in the UK. Indeed, the legacy of politics being seen as hostile and corrupted in the states they have left has created if not apathy then at least a sense that politics in Britain can be left to others. By comparison with what they know back home, there is a sense among these migrants that in the UK, government and political structures more generally work reasonably well. There is, to be sure, unhappiness over particular policies, as we see in the next section. But by comparison with the often anti-political views of the general population, these are voters who express a good degree of trust in government and the British political system even if that may not lead them to participate in the democratic process.

There is, then, in this group of voters a curious relation to political efficacy: that sense among voters that they know something of politics and believe their participation in politics can make a difference. These EU migrants certainly exhibit some trust in British politics; and generally believe that British political system works well. At the same time, rather than this leading to greater involvement in politics, the overall perception of Britain as a functioning democracy, as one participant put it, is a ‘demotivating’ factor to getting involved in politics. To these migrants, greater political involvement is associated not with a healthy political state but one where there are signs of trouble, where there is a lot to change and politics in essence is a confrontational activity where you fight ‘against’ things, not ‘for’. There is in Britain, as one participant said, ‘peace, prosperity... people are happy’, hence not much need for a direct engagement with the political system. This paradox may also be linked with the sense of novelty people feel living in the UK, even if they have lived in London for a
number of years. So, despite the sometimes gloomy picture painted of British democracy, here are a group of voters that express sense of trust and admiration for it.

**The new conservatives?**

We asked these migrants from eastern and central Europe what issues were important to them in the context of the London elections. It is worth noting that the focus group participants were a reasonable mix of London voters by party support. (For the record, the numbers were 13 who expressed support for Conservative Boris Johnson, nine for Labour’s Ken Livingstone and five for Liberal Democrat Brian Paddick.) What came out clearly, even to the extent of it crossing party lines, was that this was a group of voters that was socially conservative and economically liberal. Authority and self-reliance were key values shaping attitudes to education, work, welfare and the family – and to their experience of life in the capital more generally. This is a group of voters, even where there is an understanding that government has a duty to provide welfare and public services, that believes, as one participant put it, that it is ‘everyone for themselves’, even on an issue that is sensitive for Poles, as we shall see shortly, homelessness among migrants themselves in London.

Beyond discussions in the focus groups around the general issue of urban security and the capacity of individual mayoral candidates to tackle crime in London, a clear theme emerged that links anxiety about London as a safe place to live with broader concerns about the state of British society. As noted, these migrants are generally positive about British government and politics by contrast with what they knew back home. They see the UK as a place to come and work and make new lives for themselves and their families. But this is a group who are also, in certain respects, ill at ease with what they perceive to be prominent features of contemporary British society. Their concerns range across parenting, the family, schools, work and welfare, crime and security and London’s ethnic mix. They are views that cut across all the nationalities in our study and expressions of party support.

The first theme to pick up is around authority. The participants in all the focus groups pointed to a lack of discipline and authority at home and in schools giving rise to ‘unruly children’ and poor behaviour more generally. ‘This country needs discipline to improve a lot including teenagers, on the roads and at workplaces’ was a fairly typical comment made by one Lithuanian.
This perceived lack of authority in Britain was connected to the provision of welfare, urban insecurity and socially liberal policy reforms. These arguments were generally led by the women in our study who perceived there to be an ‘attack on the family’: that the British welfare state undermines the values of the family, more specifically the institution of marriage, by promoting cohabitation, single parenting and civil partnership between gay couples. According to the discussants, individuals are not rewarded for getting married, which leads to poor relationships and bad parenting and to a generation of young people who don’t work, commit crime and threaten the security of ‘ordinary’ Londoners. This is the comment of one participant supported by the others in the group when asked about what influenced her political choices:

[E] I generally have a little bit different perspective and opinion... I wait for someone who wants to invest in the smaller unit of society... that is in marriage. If marriage will be supported then at the same time, children are happy and society... at the moment the support is for single mothers... they get benefits, they get flats... this doesn’t help and this doesn’t advance the institution of marriage....Moderator: So you did not give up on politics...[E, laughing] no I didn’t but so far no one has put forward a plan that I would find good, no one steps forward and simply says that the robberies and crime is there because these kids are left to their own devices... the attitude towards work will not change if whole generations are living on benefits and they think that this is all right, that this is positive thing and that if you go to work it means you’re a loser...

[General nods of agreement]

This sense that social cohesion is weakened by what is perceived as a decline in traditional family structures was combined in many of the focus group discussions with a view that the British welfare state makes it too easy for people not to work. These are – and this is certainly how they perceive themselves -hard-working Londoners who expect other people to be just as hard-working as them. As other studies on migration from Central and Eastern Europe show (White 2011, Eade, et al 2007, Garapich 2008), these migrants value self-reliance, independence and work. In the context of the London elections, this provided a challenge for Ken Livingstone and the Labour Party who are associated in the minds of these
voters with support for social security for those out of work – even those who expressed support for Livingstone. These views were also shared by Paddick supporters.

The issue of homelessness in the capital brought out these values clearly. This is a highly sensitive issue. In London, up to 30 per cent of the homeless are from eastern and central Europe, most of them Polish (HomelessLink 2011; Garapich 2011). The respondents who discussed this issue generally pinned the blame for homelessness on the availability of help and the number of places for homeless people to eat, dress and wash – not on structural economic conditions or urban inequalities. Of all the mayoral candidates, Ken Livingstone is associated with help and support for the poor. At one stage in a focus group a respondent interrupted saying that homelessness had become a problem because vagrancy was no longer criminalized and ‘it should be’. Although some Livingstone supporters protested, the view shared in this instance was that the homeless are the problem, not the victim; and the ‘soft’ policy of help and state support doesn’t work. What was needed, certainly among a good number of participants in the study, was a policy of deterrence.

Not so colour blind

The perceived connection made by focus group participants between the weakening of the institution of marriage, bad parenting and welfare dependency leading to a general sense of urban insecurity and fear of crime was time and time again concluded with an indication that these issues are disproportionately concentrated among one particular group – generally articulated as ‘blacks’ or ‘coloured’ people in London. There were some respondents who protested at such a connection, but a clear majority had a perception that many of the social problems faced by Britain (and London in particular) are identifiable with one very broadly constructed social group – black people. This respondent for example said:

[B] What is interesting is that, yes, Poles do take benefits but not that much... but where the problem lies and what I think is that it is the Afro-Americans... yes, this is it! Too much really, it’s a calamity [plaga in Polish] Moderator asks whether she meant black Britons..., [B] I mean blacks [Murzyn] this is obvious, they just walk, do nothing, it is clear... do nothing and have money from it. So I think we Poles are not such a threat as other... other groups... (POL_1)
These attitudes clearly impacted on where these migrants chose to live as well as the division of London, in their minds, into black and white areas. This discussant for instance notes:

I am only speaking for myself and although I am not a racist, I have to admit that I would not actively seek out or better say I would actively look for a place to live in an area that is not Islamic or predominantly Indian.... basically I will look for something that is close to me and I think it’s similar with everyone else. (SLO/CZ)

When prompted by the focus group moderators, it was clear that it is the combination of skin colour, gender and age that generates these perceptions of black Londoners as a threat in general and young black males as a source of social urban ills, in particular. When asked to be more precise, some respondents mentioned that they meant black Britons, not black people from Africa; as in the words of one respondent, migrants from Africa are too ‘new’ to become assertive and are more ‘humble’; or that the category ‘black’ also includes people from South Asia as well as Arabs. There was some confusion over the use of the term, as participants in the study held different meanings over the term ‘black’. Generally, it was used in way to identify a group that had particular cultural characteristics that in respondents’ mind-set defined them as non-British, alien and linked with a range of social problems. Through this construction, concerns around crime and urban security merged into broader issues of diversity, multiculturalism and the welfare state. Feelings of insecurity were linked directly with black youths perceived behaviour in public spaces; and ‘estates’ were synonymous with places of crime and violence inhabited by people living off the state benefits. In one of stronger comments, this exchange between participants shows the flow of conversation from security to issues of race and diversity:

[F] crime is the serious problem; obviously since it is such a mix... and I would say that people do not realize that you have to respect the law here, there is no tolerance for crime. It is the worse disease in the city... also an inability to... also English law is based on honour, on respect to someone else’s work. Old generation still lives by this code... Poles, Russians, Czechs know how to respect this attitude... however... but...I am not racist but [lots of semi-laughs]...

[B] I think we think the same...
[F] ... it is just shocking... they are just undisciplined...

[B, A] ... yes... **Moderator: They? Who?**

[F] I mean black ones

[B] blacks... I think what the lady wants to say is that it is more about that in England there is this pressure not to allow racism and now the blacks feel stronger because of this, this is my opinion, and they behave as if they could do anything... their behaviour is... animal like, in bus, in train wherever...

[E] they feel so free like this because everywhere in offices in councils, police and workers of the ministries [as government ministry] there are these coloured people (POL_3)

[D] to some extend we are tolerant but if someone behaves like that then.... It just happens that it is more often that a black guy will piss me off than any other... or for example I sometimes am simply afraid of them... scared. (POL_2)

The views expressed in these focus groups were familiar from other studies of eastern and migrants in London. In this research, respondents also frequently conflated the presence of vaguely perceived ‘black’ inhabitants with social problems constructing their presence as essentially alien and pathological, quite often using strong racist language. For example, in a study conducted in Redbridge, asked what they disliked about the area, 15.5 per cent of respondents (from a sample of 300 Poles and Lithuanians) who answered that question, made an explicit derogatory remark about racial diversity in the area. In research in Lewisham (from a sample of 174 Polish and Lithuanian nationals), 19 per cent of respondents asked the same question answered: “too many blacks” (Garapich 2009a; 2009b).

An ESRC-funded study (Eade, et al 2007) investigating Polish migrants’ attitudes to ethnicity and London multicultural diversity stressed that this process of ‘othering’ through racializing functions as a way to emphasize the respondents’ perceived proximity to the white dominant group. These attitudes by migrants from eastern and central Europe have been highlighted by other scholars (Ryan 2011; Temple 2011) who note that cultural racism stems
from the relative ethnic homogeneity of the countries of origin. In a new environment migrants are confronted with novelty that needs to be conceptually contained and explained. Racial prejudices and categories used and generally accepted in their own cultural milieu offer well defined and simple explanations to the social world. This suggests that eastern and central European migrants are often unprepared to deal with differences; and the process of learning how to navigate through the diversity and use of language to contain it. Their surprise at the multicultural scenery of London is expressed in the form of a strongly racialized language.

Cultural racism does not exist in a social void. Indeed, identifying racial prejudices only with the ethnic homogeneity of migrants’ home countries may be to obscure not just how racial prejudices continue to exist in Britain, but also how such views connect with the social integration of these migrants into British society. These prejudices often reinforce the migrants’ perception of ‘whiteness’ as a norm and differences in skin pigmentation as alien abnormality that is ‘not from here’, ‘not local’. In other words ‘white’ ethnic migrants do receive a positive feedback from parts of British society identifying them as ‘culturally close’ ‘white’ ‘Christian’ ‘European’, implicitly juxtaposing them to more distant and hence alien and threatening ‘others’. Logically, migrants use these dichotomous categorizations of the social world around them (black/white) for reasons connected to their idea of social class and perception of group hierarchy that exists behind the official policy of multiculturalism. By identifying themselves as ‘white’, they confirm their desirable and aspirational proximity to what they perceive as a dominant group: the white British middle class (and Boris Johnson in our focus groups was picked out as a ‘typical’ Englishman). Therefore, they treat their ‘whiteness’ as an asset, which will bring them advantages in the British labour market and the British society more general.

Whatever the underlying interpretation, it is clear from our recent study and previous experience that racialization of social reality in London plays a big role in respondents political ideas and attitudes.
Conclusions

This paper has presented findings from a small study on the political attitudes of migrants from the EU accession states living in London. It contributes to a greater understanding of the political participation and political attitudes of these new migrants to Britain through a methodology that balances the institutional approach of political opportunity structures with one focusing on individual action drawing on political anthropology.

On a general level, this is a fairly passive, non-participatory group; albeit one with quite clear political views and understanding of British politics. The evidence points to lower levels of voter registration and turnout than the general population. This may not be a surprise as migrants’ concerns focus on matters of economic survival and social adaptation. Looking at previous waves of migrations to the UK and their patterns of mobilisation, migration to the UK from the A8 and A2 accession states stands out. Ethnic mobilisation in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s (Duvell 2005; Werbner, Nawar 1991; Eade 1989) was largely focused on the issue of lack of rights, institutional racism and the fight for political space. The political opportunity structures for migrants from EU accession states are, as we have seen, quite different. Indeed, the very fact that these new migrants carry with them political rights as non-national EU citizens may, we might speculate, be a de-mobilizing factor.

While migrants from the A8 and A2 accession states may be relatively disengaged from British politics, it is clear from this study that they are also a group with strong political views. Whatever particular expressions of party support, this is overall a fairly conservative (with a small c) group of voters for whom the role of the family and distrust of the state institutions are crucial components of individualistic, entrepreneurial and ‘can-do’ attitude where economic and professional advancement in a market society is valued as morally desired. By contrast, welfare dependency, lack of initiative, laziness is regarded as a real cause of social problems in Europe; and these features are then racialized as being ‘typical’ for a particular group of people.

The issue of political trust is complex one, as through the process of migration, respondents retain some of their traditional distrust of politics and the state typical for post-communist societies (Buchowski 2001) but express trust and strong belief in the way in which British politics is organized. As part of their transnational orientation (Vertovec 2010), which
essentially sees them rooted and engaged with both sending and receiving society, voters’ attitude to politics is fuelled both by experiences in home societies as well as Britain. Interestingly, the British political system and democratic process is viewed as functioning, fair and the right example for other democracies. Paradoxically, however, for some it is also a de-mobilizing factor as in their view, politics is in good hands.

Bearing in mind the transnational orientation of many of these voters, the obvious question would be this: to what extent will their future political choices be made by what happens outside the spectrum of British politics? Or, will the political choices of these new migrant voters be shaped by mobilisation in their adopted country – in particular, in the context of the complex urban environment of a city such as London? As Rogers notes, cities form fairly distinct political constituencies. London has the highest concentration of non-national European Union citizens; and a third of its population is born abroad (Gidley 2011). The character of political mobilization in this context will differ. In the 2008 London elections, the Polish ethnic institutions and the media were courted and approached by all the candidates with community meetings, press campaign and also a Polish NGO running a mobilizing campaign in order to get people to vote. In 2012 however none of this happened and candidates approaches were much more low key.

Clearly the role of racialization in the construction of social and political British landscape requires further exploration. In our view, by evoking blackness of others, eastern and central European migrants emphasize their whiteness which assumes then the aura of self-evident normality strengthening their general stereotypical perception as ‘hard-working’, willing to integrate and being ‘culturally’ close to the dominant group.

The logical question now would be to what extend this attitude will translate into political action and voting. Our study did not find particular sympathies to far right groups or notable anti-Islamic opinions. To be fair, a large proportion of respondents during the focus groups also explicitly said that multiculturalism in general is a positive aspect of London social landscape and that diversity is something they value. The same respondents, however, did also add the guarded “but...” identifying the abovementioned group as the problem. But in the context of our findings it is crucial to ask whether that combination of cultural racism sometimes reinforced by their perception of London will lead them to vote in a distinct
fashion. Although one can easily find strong racial abuse on internet discussion forums among Poles, and there are even several active Polish English Defence League members, it would be rather speculative to argue that this group of would-be voters has a potential to dislodge and change the nature of racial politics in the UK or reverse the current decline of the main far right party in the UK, the British National Party. This, however, does not mean that given the right circumstances, tension, confrontational dynamics in given local areas, these strongly racialized ideas will not translate into political action. Given that group volume, dormant but not totally passive participation patterns we could easily imagine an election where votes can be won through a racialized rhetoric to which that group may respond much more actively. The combination of anti-welfare state attitudes, strong traditional family values, perception of the left as being in the hands of ‘coloured’ people and sense of powerlessness stemming from their position on the social strata may yet deliver some surprises.

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