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'The Concept of a Better Life': The Transit of Bangladeshi Migrants to the Schengen Area via Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates recent patterns of Bangladeshi migration to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), focusing on the Czech Republic and Poland as emerging destinations and transit spaces within broader European mobility systems. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research and 74 semi-structured and in-depth interviews conducted in Bangladesh, the Czech Republic, and Poland between 2018 and 2024, the study examines how aspirations, capabilities, and perceptions shape migration trajectories among young, educated Bangladeshis. The findings reveal that contemporary migration is increasingly driven by a middle-class culture of emigration, linked to aspirations for social mobility, security, and freedom. CEE countries are perceived as attainable and affordable entry points to Europe, often serving as temporary stops on the way to Western Europe. Three distinct modes of transit are identified: long-term strategies combining study and employment; interrupted trajectories resulting from debt, unmet expectations, or precarious work; and broker-mediated transits facilitated by recruitment agencies and informal networks. The analysis highlights the central role of intermediaries and digital platforms in shaping migrants' imaginaries and practices, leading to fluid transitions between categories such as student, labour migrant, and asylum seeker. The article argues that CEE countries function simultaneously as destinations and corridors, and that migrants' trajectories are deeply influenced by their moral obligations, indebtedness, and access to capital for mobility. Transit migration should therefore be understood as a dynamic and relational process, reflecting the fragmented and evolving nature of contemporary mobility from Bangladesh to Europe.

1 | Introduction

Bangladeshi migration patterns are evolving dynamically, encompassing different categories of migrants and following either historical patterns established during the colonial period or new corridors created as part of Bangladesh's efforts to increase remittance inflows. Bangladeshis living abroad constitute one of the largest groups of migrants worldwide (OECD 2025), and the largest group coming to Europe from Asia since 2020 (UNHCR 2025).

The development driven by rapid economic growth, increasing urbanisation, and the rise of a young (unemployed) educated middle class (World Bank 2024) are contributing to large-scale migration aspirations (Bal 2014), including migration to Europe. Still, emigration to the West is very expensive and complicated for Bangladeshis, and is only accessible to a small portion of the population. That is why it is so highly valued and perceived as a "dream" within society (Mapril 2014).

Following the recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis, and despite increasing anti-immigration narratives in the EU, a new immigration trend from South Asia has emerged in Europe. Some EU countries, including Italy, France, and Austria, have seen a rapid increase in asylum applications from Asia, with a major increase by 90% from Bangladeshi nationals between 2022 and 2023 (OECD 2023). A similar trend was also observed in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries. Countries such as Croatia, Romania (Eurostat 2025a), the Czech Republic (MICR 2025), and Poland (OFP 2025) have begun attracting temporary labour migrants and international students from Bangladesh.

Research on transit migration has mainly focused on non-EU countries, which are negatively associated with politicised term irregular migration (de Massol de Rebetz 2021) and a source for human trafficking. Before some Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU, these countries were historically referred to as transit countries for irregular migrants (Düvell 2012).

Given the politicization of mobility within Europe, recent decisions by some EU countries to tighten border controls with neighbouring countries in CEE have led to this region once again being considered a transit area for irregular migrants. This decision was related, for example, to the movement of migrant workers from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria before their full entry into the Schengen area (How 2022), as well as from Poland and the Czech Republic (Martorell Junyent 2025).

The current emigration culture in Bangladesh is leading to a growing number of asylum seekers and migrant workers in Europe. Although most research on migration focuses on migrants in new destinations, we believe that it is equally important to look at prospective migrants and the values they assign to living abroad.

The main objective of this article is to identify the perception of Europe, and particularly CEE, personal capabilities, and aspirations among the "new generation" of (potential) skilled migrants from Bangladesh to CEE countries, specifically the Czech Republic and Poland, which serve primarily as transit territories. Based on this, we have identified the following two research questions:

1. How do (potential) migrants perceive CEE, and how do their personal capabilities/aspirations influence their decision to migrate there?

2. What leads to CEE countries becoming transit areas for Bangladeshi migrants?

To answer these questions, we used a qualitative approach, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 65 respondents, mostly Bangladeshis. From the conceptual perspective, we utilize the aspiration-capability model by Carling and Schewel (2018) and de Haas (2021), extended by Belloni (2020) hierarchy of destinations, and the category of transit migration (Collyer and de Haas 2012).

2 | Aspiration-Capability Framework in the Context of the Hierarchy of Destinations and Transit Migration

The decision to migrate or not is closely linked not only to local economic, social, and environmental conditions but also to personal perceptions, aspirations, and capabilities. Given this complexity, Carling and Schewel (2018) proposed an aspiration-capability approach that distinguishes between migration intentions and actual relocation possibilities to explore what people are actually capable of doing. The distinction between aspiration and capability is a two-stage approach that focuses on the thoughts, feelings, desires, or intentions that precede migration. According to de Haas (2021), this concept helps to understand migration processes and structures better.

Feelings and desires are often linked to a set of ideas and stories tied to specific places, which greatly influence migration decisions (Dennison 2024). The West, as a "symbolic geography" (Mayblin and Turner 2021, 39), and a dream is associated with better-quality education, wealth, success, and admiration (Salazar 2011), which is currently amplified by social media. According to Belloni (2020), destinations are located along a hierarchical axis of "moral obligations" towards migrant families and "social expectations", and are thus classified in a hierarchy of values that define the (im)mobility choices of individual migrant groups.

In terms of the ability to migrate, according to Alexander et al. (2016), migration decisions are determined by capital for mobility, which consists of abilities, predispositions, and contacts, often determined by family or community histories of mobility. These transnational ties are also key to facilitating emigration from Bangladesh to Europe (Morad and Sacchetto 2021), where different regional or socioeconomic classes may have strong ties to specific migration destinations (Zeitlyn 2006).

Neubauer (2024) states that current migration aspirations are linked to geographical imaginations of ideal destinations. According to him, geographical perception, often shaped by historical narratives and mainstream media, enables people to imagine a future elsewhere and influence their migration aspirations, even though they have limited or no prior knowledge of new destinations.

Similarly, Europe is a part of the imaginary for Bangladeshis, associated with *bideś*, symbolising abroad and a sense of belonging. For instance, Della Puppa (2013) shows how Italy represents a "symbolic universe" and a "dream" for the Bangladeshi middleclass associated with prestige and upward social mobility. Mapril (2014) adds that consumption of everything is desirable for a large part of the middle class in Bangladesh, and migration allows for the reproduction of social status and masculinity. According to other authors, important ideas associated with Europe, that contrast the situation in Bangladesh, are respect for human rights, political stability, social security, and freedom of speech (Morad and Gombač 2018; Ullah and Huque 2020). Similarly, Bal (2014) argues that for young, urban, educated middle-class individuals, the aspiration to migrate is often a symbol of dissatisfaction with political and economic developments in Bangladesh. This ambition remains largely unrealised due to the disconnect between their own aspirations and the mobility options.

The concept of transit migration has strong political connotations, determines the political agenda, and influences the lives of migrants. Collyer and de Haas (2012), therefore, consider it misleading because it does not reflect the fragmented nature of migration and the changing aspirations and motivations of people who move. According to Hess (2012), migration is an

unstable, non-linear, and fluid process that involves moving from one category of migrant to another, e.g., from student migrants to asylum seekers (Mohan 2025). Similarly, new destinations may gradually emerge from transit countries (Panzaru and Harding 2025).

3 | Contemporary Patterns of Bangladeshi Migration to Europe

Migration from Bangladesh to CEEs began after the emancipation of the newly established nation-states in the Indian subcontinent in the second half of the 20th century. During this period, the communist 'Eastern bloc' of socialist countries began international development cooperation with similarly left-wing-minded countries around the world. An important aspect of these agreements was the provision of scholarships to students from developing countries to study in their universities (Apor 2020).

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, some students, mainly men, stayed and later became the pioneers of the contemporary Bangladeshi diaspora in CEE, and made immigration possible for other generations to come. On the other hand, some of the students chose to return or pursue careers abroad in other European countries, including Southern Europe (Della Puppa 2013).

Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of Bangladeshis in the EU due to incomplete and unavailable immigration statistics in many countries, it is clear that Bangladeshi migration in most of Europe has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years (Eurostat 2025a; UNDP 2019). The largest Bangladeshi diaspora in the EU is in Italy, exceeding 192,000 people (OECD 2025). Since approximately 2015, a new migration trend has been emerging in Central and Eastern Europe. Between 2014 and 2025, the number of residence permit holders from Bangladesh in the Czech Republic increased from 144 to 1237, with foreign students accounting for 36.5% of this group (MICR 2025). In Poland, the number of Bangladeshis residing here increased from 160 to 6275 between 2014 and November 2025 (OFP 2025). Romania has also seen a significant increase in the number of Bangladeshi residence permit holders, from 913 in 2021 to 2643 in 2022 (Eurostat 2025a).

The most striking trend in many European countries is the increase in the number of asylum applications, including from Bangladesh. From 2020 to 2023, Bangladeshis were the largest group of persons irregularly arriving in Europe from the Asia-Pacific region (41% of arrivals), mainly through Italy. For instance, in OECD countries, the number of such claims from Bangladeshis increased by 90% between 2021 and 2022, from 19,771 to 37,663, particularly in Italy, France, Greece, Austria, and the United Kingdom (OECD 2023). In 2024, Bangladeshis continue to represent 39% of the group of Asian immigrants to Europe, using especially the Central Mediterranean route (UNHCR 2025).

A similar trend is observed in Romania, where the number of first asylum applications by Bangladeshis increased from 5 to 2800 between 2014 and 2023 (Eurostat 2025b), followed by a decrease of 2700 applications in 2024 (OECD 2025). In particular, before it acceded to the Schengen zone, Romania witnessed a trend of using its territory as a transit area for migrants from non-EU countries (How 2022), while according to the latest research, it has recently begun to become a destination country as well (Panzaru and Harding 2025). In Slovenia, Bangladeshi nationals were among the top three first applicants for asylum in 2022, with 825 applications, nevertheless, the trend almost stopped in 2023. In the Slovak Republic, Bangladeshis were the second largest group of asylum seekers in 2023, with 60 applications (OECD 2024).

It is generally understood that migrants in Asia pay high migration costs. In Bangladesh, this issue is particularly acute, as prospective migrants face the highest fees in the region (World Bank 2023). Debt-financed migration often leads to the exploitation of migrant workers and their families and frequently results in them becoming indebted abroad (IOM 2019). Yet the implications of this problem in Europe and its impact on migrant mobility are often overlooked in political and academic debates.

4 | Methodology

In an effort to gain the most comprehensive insight about the Bangladeshis' migrants' decision process, their perception of Europe, and their lives in new destinations, we conducted long-term ethnographic research in multiple locations. This is tentatively based on 74 semi-structured and in-depth interviews that were conducted with 65 respondents in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Bangladesh:

i. In Bangladesh in 2018 and 2024 - 40 semi-structured interviews with 35 migration experts from academia, public administration, non-profit organizations (NGOs) ($n = 17$), private sector representatives such as travel agency owners or licensed employment agencies, sub-agents and consultants specializing in facilitating labour and student migration to Europe ($n = 9$), potential labour migrants planning to move first to a CEE countries and then to Western Europe, potential Bangladeshi students or household members with relatives living in Europe ($n = 9$) (28 men and 7 women),

ii. In the Czech Republic in 2019–2020, 12 interviews with 11 Bangladeshi expatriates in various positions and students ($n = 9$), among whom some were involved in migration facilitation ($n = 2$), an entrepreneur who has had significant experience working with Bangladeshi workers ($n = 1$) (10 men, 1 woman); and

iii. In Poland in 2021–2022, 2023–22 interviews with 21 Bangladeshi expatriates and students ($n = 16$), among whom one was involved in migration facilitation ($n = 1$), and professionals in diplomacy, translation, and immigration specialists, entrepreneurs who had significant experience working with Bangladeshi and South Asian workers ($n = 4$) (15 men, 4 women).

We paid particular attention to selecting appropriate respondents from whom we could gather information not only about the decision-making process, but also about the migration networks and strategies used to overcome the obstacles. Repeated interviews were conducted with selected respondents among Bangladeshi professionals, private sector representatives, and potential migrants in Bangladesh and Europe to gain a deeper understanding of their subjectivity, experiences with migration

intermediaries, migration costs, motivations to migrate, and living in Europe. What is also important to mention is that some respondents were multiple migrants, returned to Bangladesh, and planned to relocate again, or were working as intermediaries while planning to study or work abroad.

Respondents were contacted through personal networks and snowball sampling. Theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2006) was used to fill gaps in the sufficient coverage of all representatives of the main stakeholders. Participatory observation, as well as "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998), enabling the building of trust and understanding of the intangible aspects of the culture under study, was conducted at important locations in the local migration infrastructure in Bangladesh (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), such as an agency mediating labour migration to CEE countries and with (potential) students migrating to CEE countries. This method was extended to social media, and other communication platforms were also used to establish contact with respondents and collect ethnographic data, in accordance with new ethical principles arising from the use of digital tools in ethnographic research (Leurs and Prabhakar 2018). In the analysis, respondents are assigned fictitious names to ensure their anonymity. The information in parentheses indicates the gender and age of the respondents and the locations and years in which the interviews were conducted.

It has been difficult to achieve gender balance due to (i) the small number of female migrants in the studied countries and (ii) the fact that decision-making positions in the private sector and leadership positions at an expert level in Bangladesh are usually held by men. As a result, the majority of our respondents are male, of Bengali origin, of Muslim faith, and belong to the educated/skilled middle class, many of whom were university educated. Consequently, our sample is biased towards middle-class aspirations.

Most interviews were recorded with the recorded consent of the respondents. In some cases, interviews were not recorded because respondents preferred more open communication due to the sensitivity of the topic. As Rutakumwa et al. (2019) show, unrecorded interviews provide the same analytical insight as recorded interviews. The length of interviews varies between 40 min and 2 h. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, and a minor number of interviews were conducted in Czech, Polish, and Bengali. All information relates to migrants who have arrived in Europe legally.

A particular methodological challenge was accessing Bangladeshis living in the countries studied, due to their relatively small numbers. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly limited the ability to travel and establish contacts with diasporas. This situation improved in 2024, when CEE countries became an important migration (transit) destination, including for foreign students and labour migrants.

We transcribed or summarized the interviews in the case of unrecorded interviews. We used Atlas.ti software for the analysis followed the analytical procedure of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) based on open, axial, and selective coding, where the created categories with subcategories are linked according to a paradigmatic model. We use Charmaz (2006) paradigmatic model, which links categories with subcategories within a set of relationships defining (A) conditions (e.g., migration culture, visa regimes, and policies) that cause (B) actions/interactions or behavioural strategies (e.g., transit or further migration) leading to (C) outcomes (e.g., authorized or unauthorized stay and entry, acceptance of precarious employment). In line with this logic, the following section will focus on the use of CEE as a transit area as a behavioural strategy.

5 | Results

In this section, we will analysze (i) how our respondents perceive Europe, what their personal aspirations and drivers for migration to CEE are, and (ii) three modes of transit to CEE and other EU countries.

5.1 | Perception of Europe, Aspirations, and Drivers for Migration to CEE

The motivations of Bangladeshis for resettling in Europe often range from lifestyle changes to the pursuit of freedom, all of which fall under the broad concept of a better life in our analysis. Almost all respondents cited achieving a better life in Europe, and this was often associated with fulfilling a "dream." For example, finding a better job and getting an education in Europe is closely linked to the idea of freedom, human rights, and life security. In our interviews, these ideas became important themes, along with a sense of imprisonment, as mentioned by several respondents. In these cases, migration often becomes the only viable option for maintaining social status and fulfilling individual aspirations, as illustrated by the following story.

Khalid (male, 25 y. o., Bangladesh, 2024), like many other young people, had completed his undergraduate studies in business administration in Dhaka and had been waiting for a visa to Romania for almost a year. Despite his college education, Khalid had difficulty finding work in Bangladesh to support his family. He insisted that he "*needed to leave*" because he saw no other way to improve his life in Bangladesh. Like some other respondents, he emphasized his need for "*security in life*". That is why he decided to go to Europe. For him, the dream of a better life meant getting a stable job that would ensure his family's prosperity. His plan was actually to look for work in Italy, and he saw Romania as a gateway to achieving his goal. Given the inability of the agency he hired to secure him a visa to Romania, he began to consider travelling to Italy via Dubai.

In addition to the broader hierarchy of global destinations, where countries such as Canada or the United States are out of reach for most potential migrants, there is also a hierarchy of individual destinations within Europe. This situation is reflected in the varying costs of visa processing. Many respondents in the Czech Republic and Poland believed that people come to CEE countries because they are more affordable. An international student (male, consultant, 35 y.o., Poland 2019, 2022), who arrived in Poland in 2017 to pursue his second master's degree, argued that migration to Poland is a domain of the Bangladeshi middle classes, while wealthier migrants choose other destinations: *"The higher middle class is not going to choose a country like Poland. They have enough money to choose some other countries. And usually, generally, Europe is not on the list for the higher class."*

According to Ayshu (female, administrative assistant, 29 y.o., Warsaw, 2021), a high-skilled worker who holds an undergraduate

degree from the United Kingdom, social media, returning migrants who motivate people in their home countries, and travel agencies that "*work for these countries*" and "*help students*" gain admission to universities and obtain visas play a key role in promoting CEE countries. In her view, these agencies "*encourage*" or "*motivate*" migration to CEE, including via social media, as a first step, and migrants then "*spread*" across Europe or around the world. She further emphasized that the reasons for further Bangladeshi migration to Central and Eastern Europe are the strong presence of a migration culture and multiculturalism in Bangladesh, which leads to a willingness to migrate and orient oneself in a different cultural environment. She also mentioned her family's migration background and the impact of established patterns of Bangladeshi migration to Europe on creating an even stronger potential for migration. She said that she also motivates people to come to Poland by sending them photos and communicating with them via digital platforms.

What shows the data gathered over a long time is the ever-growing impetus for emigration and expansion of facilitatory structures to all European countries and beyond, including online platforms, making CEE countries more attractive as part of the Schengen zone. For instance, migrating to the Czech Republic and Poland for work and study seemed to be an unknown phenomenon in Bangladesh in 2018, but became a recognised migration flow in 2024. This trend is also highlighted by numerous migrant community groups on social media and increasingly stronger presence of travel agencies and educational consultants online, mainly on Facebook.

The function of agencies is of utmost importance as they facilitate the majority of visas, especially for those without strong migration networks or contacts abroad. As noted by Siam (male, restaurant owner and broker, 28 y.o., Prague, 2021), the price for migration starts at around €10,000 for those without a "*direct link*".

In almost all interviews, obtaining travel documents and related services emerged as a major problem, together with limited international mobility options. This issue remains a key factor in deciding where to migrate. An educational consultant from Dhaka (male, 34 y.o., Bangladesh, 2024), who sends students to the Czech Republic and other countries, claimed that "*it is difficult to get a visa for a Bangladeshi passport*". Some professional respondents interviewed in Bangladesh believed that labour migration to Europe is only possible for those with significant ties or who already have friends and relatives there. As a governmental official (male, around 60 y.o., Bangladesh, 2018) noted, "*some people cannot go to Europe initially because they have no networks or other facilities*", underlying the importance of capital for mobility.

Our respondents agreed that the choice of a specific country is only secondary for migrants heading to Europe; what matters most is what Europe represents. Europe is perceived as an area of free movement and travel that unconditionally offers a future and opportunities for settlement for everyone. Another motivation for moving to lesser-known destinations in Europe is therefore their membership of the Schengen area. As another agency owner and restaurant owner in Prague argued (male, 34 y.o., Czech Republic, 2019), people do not know where the Czech Republic is located, and he needs to explain to his clients that it is "*a part of the Schengen area, and a member of the European Union, such as Germany and Italy*". And if expectations do not match reality, it is possible to move away from here. For instance, Monira (female, consultant, 29 y.o., Bangladesh, 2024) summarized this idea by saying: "*If I struggle in the Czech Republic, I can go to Italy, right?*".

5.2 | First Mode of Transit: Long-Term Migration Strategy of International Students and Migrant Workers

Respondents from among students and migrant workers in the Czech Republic and Poland expressed interest in settling in these countries, but were often unsure whether they would stay after their contracts and studies ended or return to Bangladesh. Despite general uncertainty about future developments, most prospective and current students intend to settle down and emphasize the transition from foreign student status to migrant worker status. For instance, a prospective undergraduate law student (male, 21. y. o. Dhaka, 2024) in Europe argued that "*studying is just one phase of life*" that allows for finding good employment in the future. This view is consistent with the widely held belief that education is a stepping stone to better job opportunities, which are usually found in more developed economies. Similarly, students and migrant workers interviewed in Bangladesh and Europe confirmed that studying and working in CEE countries is seen as a more accessible route to labour markets in other parts of the EU.

Sayeda's testimony (female, lawyer, 23 y. o., Bangladesh, 2024), who aspired to study law in the UK before Covid and whose brother emigrated to Poland, shows how aspiration to migrate and expected gains from international degrees can differ even among close family members. She argued that "*the concept of a better life is different for everyone*" and that "*money is what matters*", by which she meant that migration is often motivated by financial stability. For her, obtaining a university education was a way to secure a better-paid job after returning to Bangladesh. Her older brother, on the other hand, saw obtaining a degree abroad as a way to find a job after graduation and settle in Europe. He first studied in Hungary, but after unsuccessful attempts to find a job in the IT sector to finance his studies, he left school and, in 2022, opened a kebab restaurant in Poland with another student.

A researcher at a university (male, 42, y. o. Bangladesh, 2018) claimed that migrants can spend two or 3 years in a transit country, usually in the Middle East, and then move to the West once they have accumulated sufficient funds. A similar strategy can be observed among foreign students and migrant workers whose residence permits are about to expire. An international student of business administration in Warsaw (male, 26, y.o., Poland, 2019), confirmed that due to uncertainty regarding the extension of their residence status, migrants sometimes seek employment in other economies dependent on immigrant labour as a precautionary measure. Nonetheless, due to difficult bureaucratic procedures, the possibility of travelling and being accepted for residence without proper authorization, they move without complying with any administrative procedures. In his opinion, after moving to these countries, they can apply for asylum or wait for regularization programmes that legalize their stay.

5.3 | Second Mode of Transit: Interruption of Studies and Relocation Due to Unmet Expectations, Working Conditions, and Moral Obligations

When it comes to mobility as an adaptation strategy, it is also important to recognize that established perceptions of Europe often clash with reality. Many experts and established migrants in CEE agree that newcomers often arrive with inaccurate or unrealistic information about living and labour conditions, intertwined with idealized notions of Europe. In their view, this misinformation can lead to unsuccessful migration projects and dependence on irregular routes. For example, both a former diplomat at the Polish Embassy in New Delhi (male, around 40 y. o., Poland, 2021) and a court translator for Bangladeshis in the Czech Republic (female, around 40 y.o., Czech Republic, 2021) argued that such outcomes often result from unregulated recruitment practices, debt accumulation before departure, and exploitative working conditions.

Returning to above mentioned Khalid, he was aware that his planned trajectory was irregular. Based on the stories he heard, Khalid believed that once he got to Europe, it would be "*easy*" to get to Italy or other destinations. Surprisingly, he expressed a desire to stay in Romania if he could find a decent job, for example, in a restaurant. According to him, he would accept "*any job*" and admitted that he did not have a clear idea about the nature of his employment abroad. As explained by two experts working in an NGO and academia with returnee migrants from Romania (female, around 50 y.o., 2024; male, around 40 y.o. Bangladesh, 2018, 2024), migrants often end up unemployed due to fraudulent recruitment, which involves promises of jobs in non-existent companies in Europe, forcing them to either return home or try their luck in other EU countries.

In the context, Rafiqul (male, 28 y.o., Czech Republic, 2019) was recruited through Facebook and came to the Czech Republic in 2017 as a sewing machine operator and was not surprised to see that other immigrants disappeared after only a few months. He himself encountered a similar situation when he was deceived by an agency and an intermediary in the Czech Republic who promised him a "*good job*". For him, as a trained graphic designer, the position of sewing machine operator did not meet his expectations of a good job. In fact, until Rafiqul was officially invited to an interview at the Czech Embassy, he did not know the exact position or name of his employer. Anyway, the agency convinced him, and he accepted the offer. He considered himself "*lucky*" because he later found a better position in a restaurant, where he was not treated like a "*slave*" in a factory. He explained that his ability to secure a better job was due to his social capital, particularly his knowledge of English and communication skills, while his other colleagues from the factory often decided to move to other European countries with larger diasporas due to poor working conditions.

According to other respondents, migrant workers and foreign students are often aware of the difficulties that await them and are willing to endure them. The aforementioned Bangladeshi restaurant owner in the Czech Republic, who himself studied in Prague (male, 34 y.o., Prague, 2019), described the first 2 years as a "*period of sacrifice for your family*" necessary to pay off debts incurred from high migration costs. Similarly, Tarik, a prospective student to Estonia and Poland at the same time (male, 27 y.o., Bangladesh, 2024), who witnessed the hardships his older brothers faced as labour migrants in the Middle East, stated, "*It's not about the standard of living,"* and added: "*How much worse can it be if you have nothing?*" As an international student, he was preparing for a hard life in Europe, planning to study, work after school, sleep only 5 hours a day, and live on a maximum of €150-200 a month if he managed to reach Estonia or Poland. "*I won't need anything except food*," he said. "*It will take three to 5 years, and I'll be fine*." When we spoke to Tarik again after he arrived in Estonia, he was still looking for work and considering "*transferring credits*" to Germany, where he could find work "*across the street*". When asked why he felt such pressure to find a job, he emphasized, like many other respondents, that sending remittances is almost a "*cultural norm*" and that "*it would be impossible to return home without money*". Overall, he felt under pressure because he "*still has a debt to pay off to his family*", which already amounted to around €9,000 in his first year of university.

In general, it can be said that the students interviewed had difficulty finding part-time jobs, even though they believed that there were jobs "*everywhere*" in Europe. Shakil, a student in Poland (male, 27 y.o., Poland, 2021), who came to Poland as an international student in a smaller city in the vicinity of the border with the Belorussia in 2016 through an educational consultant. The *dālāl*, a broker from Bangladesh, as Shakil called him, promised him that it would not be difficult to find a job and keep up with studies. But, due to a lack of opportunities in the peripheral city, he had to start working in a kebab bistro in Warsaw. Due to his heavy workload and pressure from his employer, he interrupted his studies at university. As in his case, fear of losing their jobs is one of the reasons why some Bangladeshi students interrupt their studies and/or decide to move to another country, as in the case of Sayeda's brother, who moved from Hungary to Poland.

The decision to leave for another country is also influenced by the following factors. For example, some students in Poland described some of their experiences as "traumatic" and said they feared physical violence, racism, and discrimination at government offices, hospitals, and universities, all of which contributed to their desire to leave. For migrant workers, factors such as very low wages (e.g., €500 per month), deteriorating living conditions, and emotional stress—caused by the new environment and the knowledge that they will not be able to return the money invested within the planned periodcontribute to the decision to move onward.

5.4 | Third Mode of Transit: Mediated Transit Facilitated By Brokers

Our respondents confirmed the trend, indicating that "*only half of the people stay*" (male, 25 y.o., shopkeeper, Czech Republic, 2019) after they arrived in the Czech Republic. Some Bangladeshi immigrants have their work permits "*purchased*" and arranged by their compatriots who are already residing in Poland and the Czech Republic. Although it does not appear that half of the people actually left, this tacit agreement within the Bangladeshi diaspora deserves attention when it comes to the issue of intentional transit migration.

This view was echoed by private sector respondents such as education consultants and travel agency staff. Regarding migrant

workers, for example, a former migrant in Italy and sub-agent from a travel agency in Dhaka (male, around 40 years old, Bangladesh, 2024) claimed that "*most of our clients do not stay*" in CEE. Although he helps facilitate migration for workers and students, he indicated that many migrants seek to move from Romania or the Czech Republic to Italy, France, or other Schengen countries as part of their strategy, but also due to external factors. To meet the demand of his clients, his cousin in France provides a wide range of services to all those who arrive "*without papers*," including "*training*" on how to apply for asylum.

This method of transit has been widely criticized by some migrant workers and Bangladeshi employers in the Czech Republic and Poland, as well as by some agency owners in Bangladesh. For example, a kebab restaurant owner and broker (male, 37 y.o., Poland, 2021) claimed that transit migrants are "*outside people*" with whom he has no ties through the extended family system, suggesting that while various brokers shape migration trajectories, they have no control over migrants.

6 | Discussion

Our findings suggest that migration is mostly mediated in Bangladesh, similarly to other Asian contexts (Xiang and Lindquist 2014), and that the choice of a specific destination is often of secondary importance. Agents, such as commercial intermediaries, reinforce and reproduce existing narratives and shape migration trajectories, for example, by portraying CEE countries as part of the Schengen area, which allows them to "travel" to the West. Neubauer (2024) findings suggest a similar case for Nepalese migrants in Malta. Initially, they were not even aware of Malta's existence. After intermediaries presented Malta to them as part of Europe, they began to learn more about it, and some eventually decided to migrate there. CEE countries are thus becoming "middle-tier" destinations between traditional "lower-tier" migration regions (the Middle East, Southeast Asia) and prestigious "upper-tier" destinations. Importantly, with the development of social media, intermediaries have a significant influence on this development, shaping perceptions of destinations and engaging in what Xiang and Lindquist (2018) call "aspirational work", creating the subjective right for the purpose of obtaining a visa or legalizing residence. Our observations confirm that in some cases, the subjectivity of international students or asylum seekers may be a by-product of such aspirational work or a common strategy of migrants.

The ability to migrate, or capital for mobility (Alexander et al. 2016), is not only related to the individual capabilities of migrants and their families, but also to the capabilities of commercial agencies and intermediaries, which are an integral part of migration networks (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Although they are associated with fraudulent recruitment, they strategically mediate the tension between migrants' aspirations and the state's efforts to control migration. Recent research by Sanchez (2025) suggests that the relationship between migrants and intermediaries, even in the context of irregular migration, is rooted in more complex social relationships and is not always based on the exploitation of the former by the latter.

Unauthorised onward movement within Schengen and from non-Schengen countries to the EU is a widely accepted and recognized aspect of Bangladeshi migration in CEE. Immigration to CEE countries often becomes a natural stepping stone to other EU countries with established diasporas and marks another mode of onward movement for Bangladeshi migrants (Della Puppa et al. 2021). Although migration to the West, with the ultimate goal of reaching "upper-tier" destinations, appears to be the main objective (Neubauer 2024), there are cases of those who moved to Poland after completing their studies in the UK, or those who moved within Central and Eastern Europe, suggesting a greater complexity of further migration.

Düvell (2012) suggested developing a clear typology of transit migration to distinguish between what is considered transit migration and what is not. We believe this is particularly important given the politicization of the vague concept of transit migration. In our view, countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland have become immigration countries, but at the same time continue to be perceived and used as transit areas by the same group of migrants. A strict typology, therefore, overlooks the fine lines between the "modes of transit" that we have identified so far. While some types of migration can be described as transit, as in the case of fraud in Romania (Kanunja 2022), we believe that no categorisation reflects how migration is perceived and practiced from the migrants' perspective. Our analysis shows that the decision to migrate further (or return) is always present to some extent as a potential and is influenced by both the a priori existing hierarchy of destinations (Belloni 2020) and by external circumstances affecting each individual. Naturally, these movements can be fragmented (Collyer and de Haas 2012), non-linear, often based on ad hoc decisions and resulting from external circumstances, including those beyond the control of migrants.

As Düvell (2012) points out, conditions in migration destinations can contribute significantly to further displacement. Della Puppa and King (2019) show that Italians of Bangladeshi origin seek more opportunities and better social conditions in the United Kingdom. As in the case of our respondents who moved from Bangladesh to the Czech Republic and Poland, expectations often clash with reality in the imagined destinations, which can lead to further migration. For this reason, stories related to migration, feelings, and desires of potential migrants in a given region are important if we want to better understand migration behaviour and decision-making (Dennison 2024). Transit migration to CEE countries can thus be seen as unfinished migration to dream destinations.

Belloni (2020) shows how hierarchical perceptions of destinations structured mobility among Eritreans in places between Eritrea and Italy. Importantly, these destinations are located along an axis of moral obligations and social expectations, which, in the case of Bangladeshis, are inextricably linked to expectations of remittances and obligations to repay debts. Debt has several functions in migration, but in any case, it significantly increases migrants' vulnerability to exploitation (IOM 2019) and motivates further movement (Della Puppa 2024). In addition, it also serves as a disciplinary mechanism (LeBaron 2014) and prolongs insecurity and vulnerability to exploitation (Baey and Yeoh 2015). This is illustrated by the example of two students in Poland and Estonia, one of whom was de facto forced to take an exploitative job in a kebab shop and the other constantly considered moving to Germany. In both cases, they were expected to pay off their debt and send money home.

The risks of migration to Europe associated with insecure temporary status (Triandafyllidou 2022) and indebtedness

(Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts 2018) suggest that migration from CEE to Western and Southern Europe is shaping new ways of managing migration. The "new generation" of Bangladeshis in Europe may come from lower-middle-class backgrounds (Della Puppa 2024) or more affluent families, but regardless of their social status in Bangladesh, they may become ("unintended") asylum seekers (Del Franco 2021) and find themselves stuck in precarious conditions in Europe. Accordingly, in light of the pre-migration situation and emerging patterns of Bangladeshi emigration to CEE and Mediterranean countries, categorising new migrants as students, migrant workers, or asylum seekers does not paint a complete picture.

In line with previous research (Mapril 2014), our analysis suggests that current migration from Bangladesh to CEE is a domain of what can broadly be defined as the middle class in Bangladesh. Yet, our findings add on another layer of motivations beyond lifestyle choices, which are a need for escape from coercive social structures, respect for human rights, and social security among young educated people in Bangladesh. However, some of them are willing to significantly reduce their social status. They make sacrifices as a trade-off for gain from migration, which includes mainly a sense of ontological security, future higher social status in the community, a better life, and financial security.

7 | Conclusion

Newly arrived migrants in the Czech Republic and Poland describe themselves as middle class, often with university degrees. They come to CEE countries either as students or as short-term workers in low-skilled jobs to escape political and economic difficulties in Bangladesh. Although most migrants leave their homes in search of a "better life," this concept is often associated with social security and the ultimate goal of settling in Europe. For some of the potential migrants who were interviewed, including foreign students, migration was a matter of escape and survival. CEE is often perceived as a more accessible option, mainly due to lower living costs and simplified visa regimes, while still providing opportunities to travel to other Western European countries. Narratives, images associated with migration in Bangladesh, and broader cosmologies defining the hierarchy of destinations are also key to understanding the overlaps and blurred boundaries between different categories and trajectories of migrants, such as students, migrant workers, and (unintentional and intentional) asylum seekers.

CEE becomes both a destination and transit countries, but the concept of transit migration does not encompass the complexity of "modes of transit" and transition between different statuses as experienced by the respondents in this study. We identified that these movements and transitions occur as a natural migration strategy or might be a result of the gap between expected and experienced after arrival.

They are motivated by specific ideas about Europe as a place of free movement and obligations to repay the debt incurred before migration to finance the journey, admissions to the university, and facilitation of visas. Other important factors shaping whether CEE become transit or destination are labour conditions, moral obligation to send remittances to family, and facilitatory structures.

Capital for mobility, which emphasizes the importance of connections, effectively complements the aspiration-ability model on the ability side by including the role of commercial structures that traditionally mediate movements and mitigate limited mobility options. In this regard, despite numerous reports of fraudulent recruitment and contrary to public perception, the relationship between migrants and intermediaries is to some extent symbiotic in the sense that intermediaries help the "new generation" of migrants in Central and Eastern Europe to overcome their lack of capital for mobility.

These conclusions emphasize that the analysis of the factors that lead to Central and Eastern European countries being transit states must be situated outside the categories derived from socio-polariing contexts.

Author Contributions

Zbyněk Mucha: writing, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, conceptualization, data curation. **Robert Stojanov:** writing and editing, methodology, conceptualization.

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Ethics Statement

Respondents agreed to participate anonymously in the research and to use the results for pedagogical and scientific purposes, including publication. Their informed consent was recorded at the beginning of the interview.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors guaranteed anonymity to all interviewed respondents. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and the position of some respondents, adding more specific information about our respondents would enable their identification. All respondents consented to the use of their anonymous statements for scientific purposes.

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