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Between Integration and Work in Three Shifts: Exploring Integration Dynamics in an East German Rural Town

Entre la integración social y la triple jornada laboral: un análisis de las dinámicas de integración en una localidad rural en el este de Alemania

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In recent years, rural areas in Europe have increasingly experienced international immigration, in some cases for the first time. While labour immigration in Germany has been praised for benefiting local economies, immigrants' social integration and the level of well-being have often been sidelined. This paper applies contact theory to examine the role of contact in integration process of labour migrants in a rural town in Thuringia, East Germany. Moving beyond the idea of integration as assimilation, we expand the horizontal approach to integration research by comparing perspectives of two groups—newcomers and locals. Findings suggest that immigrants' material contributions do not compensate for their need for societal contribution. Our research also highlights the importance of shared places for encounter in rural areas and shows that their absence leads to integration being imposed, rather than negotiated.



Abstract

En los últimos años, las zonas rurales de Europa han experimentado un aumento de la inmigración internacional, sin precedentes en algunos casos. Si bien la inmigración laboral en Alemania ha sido elogiada por sus beneficios para las economías locales, la integración social de los inmigrantes y su nivel de bienestar a menudo han quedado relegados a un segundo plano. Este artículo utiliza la teoría del contacto para examinar qué papel juega este en el proceso de integración de los migrantes laborales en una localidad rural de Turingia, estado del este de Alemania. Más allá de la idea de la integración como asimilación, ampliamos el enfoque horizontal de la investigación, comparando las perspectivas de dos grupos: el de los recién llegados y el de la población local. Los resultados sugieren que la aportación material de los inmigrantes no compensa su necesidad de contribuir a la sociedad. Nuestra investigación también destaca la importancia de los lugares compartidos para el encuentro en las zonas rurales y muestra que su ausencia conduce a una integración impuesta en lugar de negociada.

International migration; labour migration; integration; rural areas; rural development; East Germany

Migración internacional; migración laboral; integración; zonas rurales; desarrollo rural; Alemania Oriental



Key words

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Dates

1. Introduction

After years of being affected by out-migration, European rural areas have, in the last decade, become homes to thousands of refugees and asylum seekers, labour migrants, and amenity/lifestyle migrants (Kordel et al., 2018). Regulations of some countries accelerated this process. For example, Germany implements mechanisms in the context of forced migration to ensure that the reception of refugees and asylum seekers is equitably divided among the federal states. Meanwhile, other types of migration to rural areas remain driven by the local need for workforce, foremost in agriculture (cfr. Rye & Scott, 2018), and people's desire for a better life. With time, integration of foreign workers into the labour market led to increased framing of migration as a silver bullet for rural peripheral places in demographic decline (Zoomers, 2023; for the debate on left-behind places see Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Dijkstra et al., 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022; Pike et al., 2023). However, these “neoliberal ‘regeneration’ frames” (Egea & Kreichauf, 2025, p. 1229) tend to leave out the perspectives of the individuals who would stay in a place long enough to actually carry out the “long-term vision for rural areas” (European Commission, 2021). In this article, we include those perspectives and compare them to the reception attitudes of the local population in an East German town. In

particular, we examine how the framing of migration as a possible local development driver affects the social integration¹ process of the newcomers.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we describe labour migration developments in East Germany to empirically frame our study topic and research questions. Then, we give an overview of the selected literature on social integration and the role of contact in this process, and present rural areas as a goal destination of labour migration. Subsequently, we provide the description of the case study area, the research sample, and explain our study procedure in the method section. We then proceed to our findings before concluding with a discussion of the results and impulses for future research.

2. Labour migration to rural East Germany: background and research gap

Labour migration has shaped population dynamics in the German Democratic Republic (GDR/DDR) since the States' founding in 1949 and again after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Until the construction of the Berlin Wall, outmigration of qualified workers from GDR filled in the market gaps in the former Federal Republic of Germany in the West. Meanwhile, immigration of the so-called "contract workers" from Algeria, Angola, Cuba, Hungary, Mozambique, Poland, Vietnam was supposed to do the same in GDR (Glorius, 2020; Oltmer, 2018). Workers were invited from these countries to fill the job vacancies in the industrial, manufacturing, and construction sectors. Despite making up to 1.2 per cent of the GDR population in 1989 (around 190,000 foreigners; Haas et al., 2019), their stay left hardly any trace in the collective memory of the German population. One of the reasons for it is the prevention of social contact between the newly arrived workers and the German population at the time, which can be traced back to the policies of the Socialist Unity Party (Glorius, 2025a). Nevertheless, through their self-organization, immigrants contributed to the public's general understanding of itself as an immigration society at the beginning of the century (Foroutan, 2019).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of the inner-German border, East Germany (except for Berlin) experienced another wave of outmigration of young workers, in sum due to economic conditions and lack of prospects. Outmigration, together with natural population decline, hence became part of the broader process of demographic peripheralisation (Schmalz et al., 2021), which particularly hit rural areas. In the following years, labour migration developments in East Germany, as well as the historically low proportion of immigrants and people with a migration background (Destatis, 2025; Engel, 2013), affected general acceptance of newcomers and slowed down the development of local migration and integration regimes. In the context of forced migration in German rural areas, Glorius et al. (2020) showed that the low level of diversity and the lack of contact with newcomers lead to negative stereotype building. Additionally, municipalities in rural East German areas experienced a weak implementation of national integration laws meant to help establish sustainable migration and participation structures (Glorius, 2025a). In result, communities in structurally weak regions started

1 Integration is a well-established term in policy debates, political discourses, and lastly, in general public, as will be shown in this paper. Authors therefore agreed to use the term for a comprehensive analysis of intergroup dynamics, and regardless of their opinion on the concept of integration.

dealing with the issues of migration and integration relatively late. Nevertheless, they became one of the loudest to call for the liberalisation of immigration law and the recognition of professional qualifications of immigrants in response to demographic change, a deficit of skilled workers, and increasing social inequality (Engel, 2013).

In this context, rural areas experienced noticeable immigration and diversification for the first time after the 2004 and 2007 European Union enlargements (for new immigration destinations see McAreavey, 2017). In this period, companies began recruiting workers from lower-income countries to fill low-wage jobs, foremost in agricultural and service sectors (for fishing industry in Norway see Stachowski, 2020; for food and agricultural sector in Portugal see Cabral & Swerts, 2021) and rural areas were transitioning from decline to economic and population growth. Labour migration was framed as essential for rural economic revival, but it also raised questions about the vulnerable and precarious situation of migrants (McAreavey, 2017) and their exposure to what Egea and Kreichauf (2025) call “predatory inclusion,” where “only their labour power and contribution to rural areas’ housing stock or the real estate market are deemed valuable” (p. 1245).

To our knowledge, role of contact in integration process in Germany has so far been researched in urban areas (Dirksmeier, 2014; Koopmans & Veit, 2014; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011) and discussed in the context of forced migration (Bürer et al., 2021; Glorius et al., 2020; Glorius, 2025a; Schneider, 2025). We aim to draw attention to de-peripheralisation processes where mobilization of external resources plays a significant role, while including the perspective of those who are enabling it. The article focuses on the context of labour migration to rural areas in East Germany and asks about “the expectations that a local society has of newcomers regarding their integration, and how these expectations are negotiated” (RQ1). Further, it addresses “the extent to which these expectations differ from the experiences of newcomers, and what consequences this has for their integration” (RQ2). Lastly, it asks about “the role of common spaces of encounter in the integration process” (RQ3).

3. Theoretical foundation: social integration and contact hypothesis

Definitions of and discussions around the topic of integration have become increasingly diverse. In short, integration can be defined as a process of acceptance into institutions and networks within society (Heckmann & Schnapper, 2003; Heckmann, 2015; Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas, 2016). In recent years, however, the relational approach to the concept received its deserved attention. This approach implies mutual adaptation between society as a whole and its institutions, on the one hand, and those who are integrating into it, on the other (Ager & Strang, 2008; Berry, 2006; Castles et al., 2003).

Embeddedness into labour market is one of the dimensions of integration. Access to labour market supports social integration by providing a chance for a between-group contact. And while the role of employment in integration has “consistently been identified as a factor influencing [...] economic independence, planning for the future, meeting members of the host society, providing opportunity to develop language skills, restoring self-esteem and encouraging self-reliance” (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 170), interviews with labour migrants show that integration into local labour market can also result in fixed ethnic division of labour within the industry and lead to their isolation from the local community (Stachowski, 2020). While

workspaces can serve as focal points of encounter in urban contexts (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011), working conditions in rural industrial towns provide a different setting for contact making. Loud noises, proximity to the machines, and functional work hinder contact in the workplace on the one hand. On the other hand, existing hierarchies and the risk of job loss can prevent the establishment of meaningful relationships (Piekut & Valentine, 2017).

We use contact theory by social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) to analyse the role of contact on the intersection of dimensions of social and labour integration. Contact theory emphasizes the importance of positive between-group social contact for reducing prejudice, and formulates several mechanisms that he believes are prerequisites for it to succeed: having a common goal, lack of competition between the group members, institutional support through laws and customs, and equal status among those who engage in the contact (ibid.; a complete list of conditions for an optimal contact strategy can also be found in Dixon et al., 2005, p. 699).

In their review of 713 articles on the contact hypothesis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found that Allport's ideal conditions are "not essential for intergroup contact to achieve positive outcomes" (p. 766) and highlight that the result is achieved in mixed conditions as well. We therefore apply contact theory to analyse workplaces and non-workplaces and use it as a starting point in our analysis of the interviews with immigrants and locals. Human geographers who study spaces of encounter challenged this theory for overlooking the specific historical and geographical contexts in which real-world interactions between members of different social groups take place (Hemming, 2011; Valentine, 2008; Wessel, 2009; Leitner, 2012; Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). In response to these critiques, we will first introduce our case study.

4. Method

4.1. Case study selection

Following Woods' (2007) argument that place-based research is necessary for a "comprehensive analysis of how rural places are remade under globalization" (p. 486), this paper takes a case study approach to examine social and societal dynamics in a new immigration destination in East Germany. Falkental² is a town (*Landstadt*) in rural Thuringia with a long tradition of industry. It is an example of transformation of an industrial town through migration. According to the typology of cities and municipalities by the German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR, 2023), Falkental still carries the title "town" thanks to its basic central function, despite its population size of less than 5,000 inhabitants. Nevertheless, the rural character is manifested in a lower population density than in the surrounding urban areas.

Therefore, this case study was chosen based on its population size, peripheral location, share of foreigners, positive population development, and a high share of, the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) voters. In contrast to urban industrial centres with super-diverse populations (Vertovec, 2023) that were in economic decline, such as the Ruhr

² This pseudonym is used to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.

region in western Germany, there has been little international migration to Falkental in the past. Like the rest of East Germany, Falkental faced an accelerating population decline after German reunification, with emigration and ageing leading to a shortage of the skilled labour force. But after the town reached the lowest number of inhabitants in its recent history, its yearlong economic and demographic decline was halted by the recruitment of people from the new EU member states.

As a result, foreign population accounted for around a quarter of the inhabitants of Falkental in 2022 (Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2024). This not only deviates from the average of 7% in East Germany (Destatis, 2025), but is also well above the average of other municipalities of comparable size throughout Germany. Based on the interviews, Falkental is a home to people with various migration histories, with the majority coming from Romania. This is also reflected in our sample “newcomers,” which consists almost entirely of workers from Romania employed in local factories, as well as their family members. The sample also includes people of other nationalities who have moved to Falkental; however, their nationalities are not disclosed for data protection reasons.

Despite this positive local development, AfD won the 2024 state elections in Falkental with approximately 40% of the vote³ (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, 2024). This can be explained by what Schmalz et al. (2021) call a “migration paradox:”

It is precisely the demographically depleted regions in the inner periphery, which are most dependent on immigration economically, that often have the lowest approval ratings for migration among the population. And it is in these regions that the far-right political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) achieves some of its biggest election victories. (p. 150; own translation)

We identified signs of de-peripheralisation in Falkental based on the model provided by Kühn (2016). They include growing and rejuvenating population, economic upswing of the industrial sector, and progress in the area of socio-technical infrastructure, reflected in the expansion of schools and kindergartens. In contrast, in other rural municipalities of similar size in Thuringia, these institutions are at risk of closure. Therefore, Falkental is an example of a politically desirable development in other parts of East Germany and in the EU, which makes it a remarkable research site.

4.2. Data collection and data analysis

This paper draws on qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over the course of nine months in 2024 and 2025. From 46 interviews with households and 16 interviews with local stakeholders (experts) conducted in the scope of an international research project in Falkental, we selected interviews with 22 participants aged between 20 and 87 (Table 1). The selection criterion was their thorough treatment of the topics of coexistence in communal life and focus on the topics of migration and integration in the context of local development. We divided the interviews into two samples according to participants’ experience

³ East Germany’s average including Berlin is 27,1%; on the national level, AfD is the second-strongest party at almost 16% (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, 2024).

with migration to be able to answer our research questions and ensure parity of participation (Fraser, 2010), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected demographic data of interview participants; own data

Newcomers			Locals		
Code	Age	Gender	Code	Age	Gender
I1	35–40	male	I12	20–25	female
I2	40–45	male	I13	55–60	male
I3	45–50	male	I14	55–60	male
I4	50–55	female	I15	40–45	female
I5	30–35	female	I16	80–85	female
I6	45–50	male	I17	85–90	female
I7	45–50	female	I18	45–50	female
I8	35–40	female	I19	55–60	male
I9	45–50	female	I20	70–75	female
I10	45–50	female	I21	45–50	male
I11	35–40	female	I22	45–50	male

The first sample thus includes participants who had crossed an international border to work in Falkental and had been living there for more than three months (sample “newcomers”). In interviews, they additionally discussed their reasons to emigrate and their initial experiences in Germany. The second sample are participants who were born in Falkental (sample “locals”). This sample also includes interviews with local experts, that is, people who are active in decision-making bodies and closely involved in the towns’ social and political life. Due to their positions, these individuals have insights and experiences not shared by other study participants, enabling them to situate the current circumstances in Falkental within a broader context. However, they are also quoted as locals when they address their private lives.

As part of our recruitment process, we published calls for participation on social media and in the local newspaper, and distributed flyers in Falkental. Since this yielded only limited results, we sought assistance from the interpreter in recruiting non-German-speaking participants and applied snowball sampling afterwards.

We tried to ensure gender balance in the sample, whereas both samples entail more female than male participants (sample “newcomers” seven and sample “locals” six). The average age of the sample “newcomers” was 43, which was younger than that of the sample “locals,” whose average age was 55. This can be explained by the fact that migrant workers are of working age and thus younger than the native population. To anonymize the data fully, we used age categories instead of the exact ages in Table 1. All interviews were conducted individually, except for three interviews (I1 and I2; I6 and I7; I21 and I22), in which the participants insisted on participating together. The duration of interviews ranged between 30 and 144 minutes.

Frequent mention of the experiences with (failed) integration motivated us to take an inductive approach to this topic. We encouraged respondents to share their views by giving them

sufficient time, as we view integration in rural areas as an ongoing process that should be supported so that communities can develop not only economically but also socially. Interviews with non-German-speaking participants were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter, which facilitated a higher participation rate and fostered a more relaxed interview environment, but also influenced the duration of the interviews.

All interviews were transcribed using MAXQDA software. The transcripts were then manually reviewed by the authors and student assistants. We first applied open coding to them, which allowed us to identify similarities and differences between the two samples and contrast them to the theoretical formulations of social contact and integration. This step resulted in categories “identity,” “social participation,” and “social engagement.” We then proceeded with axial coding according to Strauss & Corbin (1990) to find relationships between the categories and test them against data. In this step, we recognized the explanatory power of common spaces in relation to the process of integration. Finally, selective coding and accompanying discussions resulted in the core categories “experiences” and “expectations” which we expand upon in the chapter 5.2. All quotes presented below were translated by the authors into English.

5. Findings

5.1. Interpersonal contact across “the invisible boundary:” the role of common spaces in integration process

When a methane gas leak caused an explosion in a small town in Romania’s Banat region, many former mine workers and their families found themselves facing severe existential uncertainty. This caused a crisis-driven labour and motivated many to seek work outside of Romania. Simultaneously, and after Romania joined the EU, the system of free movement of workers enabled factories in Falkental to recruit labour from the new EU member countries. This led to the development of migrant networks, as workers, along with their friends and families, moved to Falkental.

Working conditions in local factories are mostly described in the same way: strict and disciplined. I10, a worker in one of the factories, reports that “you are just supposed to do your job, not to communicate” (I10, newcomer). This contrasts the understanding of the workplace as “a realm where friendships can develop which stretch beyond that environment” (Piekut & Valentine, 2017, p. 177), often found in urban contexts. Based on the interviews, we are free to assume that the work dynamics would leave barely any motivation for pursuing contact in the workplace, even if power dynamics—according to which “one should work, not speak” (I5)—were different. I7, a newcomer who says she is used to the monotony and repetitiveness of the job, sees it as the sole purpose of her stay in Falkental:

When I started, I used to explain to my friends that I work like Homer Simpson. I press the button, click, and that’s it. [...] [But] the colleagues are not exactly great; they could be better. They don’t like foreigners, but we go there to work. We don’t go there to socialise [...]. (I7, newcomer)

In this quote, I7 expresses a desire for more interaction at work, but quickly cuts herself off, as if she has just remembered the real reason she is there. The quotes above illustrate an atmosphere that does not align with Allport's optimal conditions for contact-making: workers do not hold equal status, nor is contact promoted by their workplace. Apart from the fact that it is not a place to socialise, interview participants addressed how working conditions in a factory affect their free time and their willingness to participate in local social life:

Workers work and [...] they take care of their families, they meet up with their families a little at the weekend, and they don't have time to make contact with others. [...] Or they came home from work and don't feel like doing anything anymore. [They say:] "I just want to be left alone," that's all. Then it's difficult to tell them: "Come on, we have so many associations, why don't you join them?" (I2, newcomer)

In the interview, we asked about adult education institutions and integration courses with caution, as integration projects for immigrants could contribute to reinforcing prejudices instead of reducing them (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011). In response, interviewees talked about the accessibility of language classes offered in the county capital, how they require a high level of mobility, and how they need to be compatible with shift work:

When I'm on the early shift, I can't not come. When I'm on the late shift, I'm [at the language school] early. When I'm on the night shift, okay, I sleep for two hours, then I'm there. And so on... I've been doing this for more than six months, and I think that's how long the whole course took. And I only slept for about two hours at that time. (I1, newcomer)

Another source of new social contact for immigrant parents outside of work is other parents (Bernard, 2007; Stachowski, 2020). A quote by I1, a newcomer, illustrates that this way to encounter new people proved to be successful, but changed as his child grew older:

I tried [making contact to other parents] when my son was little and a few children from the kindergarten said they'd like to come over and see my son. So, I said, "OK" and I asked their mums or dads "Do you want to come in, too?" The children played for an hour. That gave us a chance to have a glass of water and have a chat [...]. The children are well integrated, but we're completely out of the loop. (I1, newcomer)

In the town, although there are no ethnic associations, there are more than twenty cultural, volunteer, and sports associations, which meet Allport's criteria of having a common goal and ensuring more equal status among participants. Still, not all newcomers view local clubs as a place to turn to, mainly because they lack the time or interest to engage. I9, a newcomer, explained that the town's cultural offer does not necessarily meet requirements of all its citizens and their demographics. Similarly, sport associations are open to men and children mostly. This motivated her to search for offers in the town's surroundings:

We went to the town hall in [a nearby town] and asked how we could integrate, what we should do [...] and they said we could play an instrument or join the fire department. We can't play an instrument, so that was out. We were out. (I9, newcomer)

Nevertheless, participants of both samples identify sport associations as the place where direct social contact between locals and newcomers takes place in Falkental. I22, a coach in one of the sport clubs, sees their organisation as a place where integration is put into practice:

The German language is quite difficult, and [the newcomers] say that when they're here with us, it's much easier because they pick up a lot from us—especially when it comes to speaking in full sentences, how to phrase things and so on. They don't learn that in their theory lessons, but they learn it here with us on the sports field, in the gym or somewhere else, because they communicate with us, and that's an important thing for us; we enjoy doing it too, and as long as everyone gets on board and wants to, everyone is very welcome. (I22, local)

The voluntary nature of contact in schools or associations differs from contact in bars and restaurants—which play only a marginal role in Falkental—or in markets and shops, where contact is inevitable. I12, a young local, describes the ephemerality of this kind of contact: “You meet [the Romanians] at the supermarket because one [of them] works at the check-out there or the other works here [in the bakery], and you just know them, so you say ‘Hello’.” Small acts of kindness and recognition of one another were proven to play an important role, both for immigrants' integration process and for the feeling of familiarity of locals (Ager & Strang, 2008; Glorius et al., 2020). However, short-lived encounters which “comply with the norms of social civility” (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011, p. 728) lack the contact valence to successfully stimulate changes in attitude or behaviour (Valentine, 2008; Piekut & Valentine, 2017). A participant, who has close contact with immigrants in several areas of his life, described this gap as an indefinable distance between locals and newcomers:

When it comes to cultural exchange—which for me is also part of integration, on both sides, of course—, if there were a Romanian cultural evening or something similar, I would surely take part in it. [...] But that's where an invisible boundary just seems to be drawn somewhere. (I13, local)

The analysis of interviews quickly revealed that newcomers and locals hold differing views on how spatio-temporal factors shape interpersonal contacts in Falkental. We analyse these in the following chapter.

5.2. Integration: expectations of locals vs. experiences of newcomers

Integration processes are highly diverse and depend on personal, social, and societal factors, national policies, and local and regional contexts (Garcés-Mascreñas & Penninx, 2016; Woods, 2016). In Falkental, integration of newcomers is challenged by their working conditions and the existing dynamics in the town. Among the sample “locals,” presence of newcomers is generally praised, as they are considered responsible for sustaining the town's future economic growth and prosperity. I16, a local who expressed an unreceptive attitude toward newcomers throughout the interview, stated that “it's unnecessary to scold” on the matter of town's development, because “if the Romanians didn't buy and renovate the houses, they would all fall apart and we would only have old houses, only old ramshackle buildings here.” A participant in the sample “newcomers,” who came to the town around the same time as the factory workers from Romania and witnessed its changes, estimates the developments similarly:

The fact that so many Romanians have come here is a very good thing for the town, because you can see that this house used to cost 59 [thousand euros]. How much does this house cost now? Four times as much—not twice, but four times. The reason is that people have come here because they’re looking for apartments. The school is saved; the kindergarten is saved. (I3, newcomer)

For I1, one of the newcomers who bought a house in Falkental, this is not an unusual phenomenon. “We want to take care of the town, because we live in it,” he explains, but adds that feeling integrated for him means “to be part of the culture in Falkental” (I1, newcomer). Grounded in participants’ statements, we identified similarities and differences in their understanding of integration and the role of contact in it. They are presented in Table 2 and described below.

Table 2. Experiences and expectations of integration; own data

Actors	Experiences of integration	Expectation of integration
Locals	Distance with the potential for openness	Integration as the fulfilment of requirements
Newcomers	Distance with membership aspirations	Integration as a relational process

5.2.1. Integration as distance with the potential for openness

Most participants in the sample “locals” emphasized cultural differences above all else. This included work culture (“I think there are huge differences between cultures in working standards and occupational safety,” I13, expert) as well as culture in the sense of norms, customs, and habits (“They’re wired completely differently,” I16, local). The interviewees in this sample perceive Romanian co-citizens as being much more family and community oriented than their German co-citizens. Some see them as if they “don’t really integrate into the German part and seek support there, but rather stay among themselves” (I13, expert). I16, a local, attributed this perception of immigrants as “the Other” to the novelty of their presence in the town: “They are doing things unlike what we are familiar with,” recalling Falkental’s role as a new immigrant destination (McAreavey, 2017).

In this sample, participants described staying up late at night, playing loud music, sorting waste in a different way, or not following official construction instructions as deviant behaviour, which quickly became the local hearsay:

For example, some of them built their houses without following building regulations, which caused problems. Or they partied late into the night and set off fireworks, which disturbed the neighbours. When things like that happen, word gets around in no time. (I17, local)

The differences between the newcomers and locals become especially apparent in public spaces where social cues are exchanged, such as parks and playgrounds. Public places are not perceived as places of cross-cultural exchange by the participants in the sample “locals,” although their accessibility “makes [them] an ideal realm for intergroup encounter” (Piekut & Valentine, 2017, p. 177). I13, a local, says he is “still amazed at how different, but highly interesting, the topic of raising children [in the two cultures] is” based on what he observed in

his neighbourhood. One neighbourhood, which hosts the most immigrants in Falkental was frequently mentioned by this sample. I19, who works in the field of property management, explained how apartment allocation functions, giving a clue of why there is higher concentration of newcomers in one part of the town:

[We] do have only German entrances, too. We try, with certain entrances, to keep it that way so that there isn't necessarily, er, so that there isn't any mixing. Otherwise, I don't really see it as something I pay much attention to. There are properties where I definitely don't want that [mixing], but that only works as long as I can still find German tenants. If I didn't have any German tenants now, and the flat went vacant, then it would become mixed. (I19, expert)

According to I19, properties where there is “no mixing” in Falkental are reserved for those with a higher purchasing power, here Germans. The interviewee also explains that buildings with a high proportion of foreign residents consist of “usually [of] the apartments that are a little cheaper than older properties” and that “above all, they also tend to attract people who want to live there because they can be among their own kind [Romanians].”

In contrast, nuanced opinions on the topic of in-group differences were expressed by the participants who are in regular contact with newcomers, like locals I22 and I21:

I22: Just to give some background: in Romania, it's actually much the same as in Germany and many other countries; they also have different—let's call them ethnic groups—and in Romania there are regions, cities, towns, districts, just like here, which are already quite German in character—there are many Germans there who speak a lot of German—but then there are people there who aren't like that, real locals and so on and so forth [...] We have four Romanians in our men's section alone who speak excellent German, they told us, that's where we learn it from. We don't just know this somehow, but we learn from them that they also have groups that are a bit stricter, let's call it that, there are some who are really open-minded and want to integrate, and that is then reflected here as well.

I21: But there are also many people in Falkental who are against it [...] that the Romanians are here at all. Because there are too many of them, because they supposedly make too much of a mess, and well, it's difficult.

I22: But the Germans are just the same.

People who are made between-group contact a part of their everyday life show potential for supporting newcomers' social integration. These “structural transversal enablers” (Radford, 2016, p. 2135) also have a positive influence on intercultural dynamics between locals and newcomers. They are usually active in associations where contact is on equal footing and has potential for lowering intergroup bias through positive face-to-face interactions, as the extract illustrates.

5.2.2. Integration as the fulfilment of requirements

In contrast to experiences, expectations reflect a shared vision of a society and are normative in nature. As integration is “both a process and a (desired) state” (Schulte, 2000, p. 36; own

translation), it is necessary for us to examine how participants in the sample “locals” imagine the society into which newcomers are expected to integrate to.

For a majority of participants in this sample, language—alongside employment—is essential for integration. This has also been pointed out by Bürer et al. (2021) in their research on integration practices and attitudes of civil society actors in rural areas in context of forced migration, where they found that “success in these areas are being viewed less as an *end to* and more as a *prerequisite for* integration” (p. 16, original bold). As they show, learning a new language is a one-way requirement, as there are no counter-expectations that need to be fulfilled by the local society (ibid.). This understanding of integration implies a presupposed idea of a society which is yet to be learned by the newcomers. However, as they are not negotiated or discussed, the implicit ways in which locals envision society remain unclear to them, as illustrated in the experience of I11:

Two months ago, I had a fight with a colleague. [...] [She scolded] “You Romanian!” and all that. It was a very ugly thing to say, because I’ve been working there [with her] for almost four years. And then she referred to the fact that I am Romanian [in a fight] so I came over to her and said “Well, can you explain to me what it means to be a German? Because I don’t understand it yet.” [...] She had no answer. (I11, newcomer)

When asked what makes Falkentaler, I14, local administrator, portrayed the archetype of the town’s citizen as a person who “enjoys being outdoors, going hunting, fishing, and pottering about, being happy to go somewhere and meet people they know.” Considering the town’s many local associations, he stated that “anyone who can’t find a hobby in Falkental only has themselves to blame” and that “anyone who comes to [the town] and commits to the local community or gets involved, is part of it.” This “symbolic community” (Weichhart, 1990, pp. 67-74) embodies the myth of a shared past, present, and future, and derives its significance not from an actual existence but from an imagined one. Nevertheless, it serves as a common point of reference, a source of potential action, and a means of inclusion/exclusion (cfr. Weichhart, 1990; Vogelgesang et al., 2018). Based on our comparison of the two samples, commitment to the local community and its development is interpreted differently and, on its own, is not enough for the participants in the sample “newcomers” to feel like they are part of it. Rather, if expectations and norms set by the dominant society are not negotiated, any attempt at integration may be portrayed as the responsibility only of those seeking to integrate, or—if this attempt does not align with the set expectations—as “failed”.

5.2.3. Integration as distance with membership aspirations

Participants in the sample “newcomers” who came to the town upon the company’s initial recruitment report experiencing negative and discriminatory experiences. Despite this, or precisely because of it, some of them show understanding for the mistrust and wariness of the local population in the first years of labour migration to the town. The “overload of immigration” (I1, newcomer) might—in the eyes of some respondents—have been “too much for the people of Falkental” back then (I2, newcomer), because “they did not know what kind of mentality [the Romanians] are bringing with [them]” (I1, newcomer). For others, like I11, accumulation of discriminative experiences in Germany and abroad, led to a deeper self-doubt and questioning if there is something inherently wrong with identifying as Romanian:

[In Spain] I've met a lot of people who were racist. [...] There's always this Romanian thing, because we're Romanian. I think we have something... And whenever someone—this is just from my perspective—says, “Oh, that Romanian crap.” You know, it's like, as if Romanians have something intrinsic that isn't nice—I don't know, something that isn't nice to others. (I11, newcomer)

I8, a newcomer, reports on being perceived by locals in public space and noticing fear. She perceives it as a common reaction “when you see so many Romanians, and they all speak only Romanian.” This reaction is found in the interview with I16, a local, who reacted to place appropriation of a local playground more with resignation than fear:

I see that over here on the playground. In the summer, whole families are outside from noon until dark, sitting on the playground, the elderly are there, they have their dinner, they have their drinks, they look after their children, the elderly sit there and the Romanians... These have become Romanian playgrounds. (I16, local)

From the perspective of newcomers, like I9, there is no specific place where people who are new to town could meet except for playgrounds, regardless of whether they have children or not. In the interview, she expressed a wish for another common meeting place:

We, the Romanians, would like to have a barbecue area. Someone told us there's a spot somewhere in the woods. But so far, we haven't seen it. We haven't been there. We have no idea where it is. [...] It's supposed to be somewhere [in the woods], but if that is true, we would need to ride three or five kilometres by bikes [to reach it]. (I9, newcomer)

The example of the same respondent, who had to quit her job at the factory, illustrates how working conditions leave little room for contact making. Although she described having to quit as a burdensome experience, it has forced her to interact with more people in Falkental. In that way she became what Radford (2016) calls an “everyday transversal enabler:” “any individual in the community who, in everyday life situations, positively influences intercultural dynamics in the community” (pp. 2135-2136):

I was in contact with lots of Romanian people [in this period], because before that I wasn't in touch with the German people, but not with the Romanian either, because I didn't have time. And lots of people need help. Lots of foreign people here need help; they simply don't know the laws. (I9, newcomer)

Based on the experience of providing translation for other newcomers and accompanying them to medical and legal appointments, I9 states that integration “has nothing to do with the German language,” but “should also mean that we know what is happening in this town and what we should do to improve our lives here.” Like her, other respondents in this sample recognize their isolation and view integration as getting involved in the town's matters: “We can't go any further like this. We are isolated from the town, and the town is isolated from us.” (I1, newcomer)

5.2.4. Integration as relational process

The term “local community” was rarely used by the “newcomers” sample. Even less frequently did the term “Falkentaler” occur in it as a point of reference for the population’s spatial identity (like in the above quote by I14). In contrast to the participants in the sample “locals,” none of the respondents in the “newcomers” sample indicated that they belonged to a certain—Romanian—community, nor that they created one. Some newcomers, like I11, expressed ambivalence in regard to ethnic-based relationships and showed inclination to the local population while being accustomed to racism:

There are some really nice people here. [...] Some people might say there’s a bit of racism, but it’s not extreme. And I think that happens everywhere, too. [...] And new persons do not interest me. It’s fine, a new person is very welcome at Falkental, but I’m not interested [in meeting them]. [If they say:] “I need help.” Maybe, yes, I’ll help, but I’m not interested in more. (I11, newcomer)

Others see out-group contacts as a basis for successful integration:

I’ve been here for so many years, almost 14 years, and I can’t say that I’m integrated here, despite having a job and speaking a little German. I can go here and there on my own and take care of my papers. Whatever I have to do, I can do it myself. But that doesn’t mean that I’m integrated. We don’t have any friends, German friends, with whom we could visit and make contact and talk and hear more [about the town] and learn about Falkental, for example, or about people in general. And they can also learn about us and so on. (I1, newcomer)

This extract also demonstrates that the absence of meaningful social relationships may diminish the existing sense of belonging, even when all other conventional requirements for integration have been met. Looking back to when she arrived, I8, a newcomer, sees a noticeable shift in the attitude of the local society:

I8: What I noticed is that it’s completely different when you talk to people, than when you don’t say anything. “Romanians don’t understand German,” “Romanian people don’t talk to us,” and so on.

I: Who says that? The Germans?

I8: Yes.

I: And then when you make contact?

I8: And then they see, it’s not that bad.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we have sought to understand what Schinkel (2017) calls “immigrant integration imaginaries.” We looked into expectations of integration of labour migrants and how they navigate them and compared these expectations to their everyday experiences. We drew on Allport’s (1954) contact theory, which posits that prejudice toward out-groups can be reduced when members of different groups interact under equal status conditions and with institutional support, to understand how contact making processes effect different understand-

ing of “integration.” We included the analysis of common places and working conditions of the new arrivals to see how they might affect their ability to build relationships both at work and outside of it.

We found that the participants in the sample “locals” set expectations primarily on migrants’ language acquisition and their employment, as both are considered “minimum requirements for integration” (I13, expert). Framing the utility of immigrants in form of their employment is a “key argument for stabilizing the discourse on migration” (Glorius, 2025b, p. 107; own translation) and thus also a point reflected in our results. Immigrants’ contribution to the town’s infrastructure revival and an improved townscape has been acknowledged and welcomed in this sample. However, contact making is further hindered by ethnic discrimination in the housing market, which is described by local population as self-segregation and a desire of newcomers to stay “among their own kind” (I19, expert). Strikingly, no attempt was made by participants in this sample to consider the relevance of labour conditions—including long working hours, night shifts, and commuting—for meeting the integration expectations and establishing meaningful social relationships.

On the other hand, participants in the sample “newcomers” view integration as a two-way process and highlight the relationality of it. This is also more in line with the current understanding of integration in migration research (as introduced in the theoretical foundation of this article). When comparing the two samples, we found that the image local residents have of the immigrant population regarding their integration does not reflect immigrants’ own assessment of their level of integration in the town. Concretely, their material contribution through investment in housing stock does not compensate for their need for societal contribution. Furthermore, the implicit expectations that newcomers must meet, but are not negotiated with them, as well as the behavioural norms to which they must adapt, but are not aware of, lead to increased sense of social exclusion. In this regard, the participants highlight feelings of isolation and detachment from the town’s matters.

These results give us answers to the expectations of local population and the consequences they have on social integration of newcomers. The third question of the article on the role of common spaces of encounter provides us with a material aspect of encounters and contact-making and will be discussed in what follows.

In our analysis, we identified almost no other place besides sport association where residents could meet face-to-face. Without detracting from their importance, sport associations gather mostly male members and children, while overlooking women. Regarding gender differences in both samples, male participants more often mentioned being active in political life, while female participants more often stated that they cannot find time for regular partaking in social activities due to work obligations and household labour. Additionally, the decision of (immigrant) women to participate on the local social life is further affected by their limited mobility. Not having a driving licence leads to greater dependence on their spouses and affects their ability to change their workplace or to find work in the surrounding area, as confirmed by a local expert who employs immigrant women in her care facility. This points to a disadvantage which (immigrant) women experience based on the intersection of their gender, class, ability, and ethnic background, and how this reflects in contact-making opportunities. And while our results confirm that motherhood helps diversify migrants’ social contacts (Stachowski, 2020), they also show that it reduces their time capacity for participation in local social and political life.

To mitigate this, we argue that rural areas that are new migration destinations require physical places for contact-making and establishment of relationships, which could prevent, or milder, existing spatial and group-based segmentation processes (see also Arndt et al., 2020; Kersten et al., 2022; Vogelgesang et al., 2018). While it is beyond the scope of this article to investigate whether this adaptation could affect participants' decision to stay in the town in the long run, it is reasonable to think that it could increase their sense of belonging, as the majority of participants stated they already see their future in Falkental as long as they have a place to work. If modern economies rely on migrants "to fulfil growth and development objectives" (McAreevey, 2012, p. 503), they are to be held responsible for ensuring that people have a chance to develop their sense of belonging. This is particularly, but not exclusively, relevant for the peripheral regions of East Germany, where the depletion of the local population's labour pool has progressed significantly (Schmalz et al., 2021), and migration is becoming increasingly important not only for economic growth but also for sustaining the economy.

In her work on new rural destinations, Ruth McAreevey (2012) states that "[t]he legislative framework lies clearly within the bailiwick of government; less clear however, is the question of who ought to assume a more proactive role by reaching out to migrants and thereby understanding and responding to their needs" (p. 503). While recognizing that migrants are not a homogeneous group, we consider having presented one need and a dimension of social well-being: social integration (Keyes, 1998). We also acknowledge the limited generalizability of our study due to the town's industrial character. Its economic background is thus more comparable to that of, e.g., the settlement of Sacriston (Tomaney et al., 2023) than to regions with a strong agricultural character. Nevertheless, considering the increased and diversified research on rural areas of the past decades (Murdoch et al., 2003; Halfacree, 2007; Woods 2016), our article builds on the understanding of rural areas as a non-homogenous spatial unit. We appreciate the fact that Europe's rural areas are diverse and that there is no single, universal migration pattern which can be found in all of them. Where we see the importance of our results is the commitment to facilitating integration at the local level—that is, strengthening local capacity for action. Future migration research on rural areas as new immigration destinations should thus highlight the needs of the newcomers in the early stages of their arrival. Longitudinal studies could reveal whether an early response to immigrants' need influences their decision to stay long-term, thereby shaping the future vision of their new home. And research on social wellbeing could explain if and how newcomers' well-being depends on their capacity to contribute to society in non-material ways. This would help understand how shared ideas of places could be set into motion and strengthen our democracies in the face of their current relapse.

Data Statement

The data analysed in this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality restrictions, as they lead directly to the interview participants and can endanger their security.

Declaration on the use of AI

In the creation of this paper, the authors have used LLM DeepL for a grammatical check-up and language correction.

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