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Essential work, yet expendable workers EU mobile workers' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Nether-lands

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EU mobile workers' experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic in the Netherlands

Natalia Skowronek, Lisa Berntsen and Daniela Trifu

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the precarious position of many EU mobile workers to the fore, especially when virus outbreaks concerned groups of 'essential' EU mobile workers. Despite the heightened public and political attention to their specific situation, the lived experiences of EU mobile workers during the pandemic, beyond the mediatized dire cases, remains understudied. Based on 35 in-depth interviews with Polish and Romanian workers in the Dutch distribution and meat-processing sector in 2021, we highlight the experiences of this diverse group of workers. While the pandemic changed the way many people in the Netherlands worked, it hardly affected the everyday working life of the EU mobile workers we interviewed. Their work continued on-site throughout the pandemic, with partial adaptions to implement Covid-protection and safety measures. The interview material shows that many workers are happy to work in the often physically demanding jobs, yet feel under-appreciated by their employers. Hardly any of the interviewed workers received specific care from their employers, or from (people in) Dutch society during the pandemic regarding their specific situation and possible needs. Instead, many workers were left to fend for themselves: one resigned to take care of the children during school-closures; another felt forced to break quarantine to buy some essential groceries; yet another changed jobs to escape lax implementation of Covid-19 protection measures at the workplace. We show in this paper that the pandemic and the Covid-19 measures were experienced differently depending on the EU mobile workers' personal and family situation, the socio-economic backgrounds, and the envisioned future plans. We conclude the paper with recommendations for sustainable improvement of the position of EU mobile workers in the Netherlands, so that they *as workers* become valued for their structural contribution to the Dutch labour market. We specifically suggest to 1) improve policy appreciation and acknowledgement of the position of EU-mobile workers, 2) to strengthen employers' duty of care, and 3) to enhance EU mobile workers' voice and support. This working paper is a publication from the inter-disciplinary research project 'Migrants in de Frontline' that explored the impact of the Covid-19 measures on migrant workers in essential sectors in the Netherlands.

Key words

Covid-19, essential work, EU mobile workers, lived experiences at work, the Netherlands

Samenvatting

De Covid-19-pandemie bracht de precaire positie van veel Europese arbeidsmigranten onder de aandacht, vooral toen virusuitbraken groepen "essentiële" Europese arbeidsmigranten betroffen. Ondanks de verhoogde publieke en politieke aandacht voor hun specifieke situatie, blijven de ervaringen van Europese arbeidsmigranten tijdens de pandemie onderbelicht, op de – in de media besproken – trieste voorvallen na. Op basis van 35 diepte-interviews met Poolse en Roemeense werknemers in de Nederlandse distributie- en vleesverwerkingssector in 2021 belichten wij de ervaringen van deze diverse groep werknemers. Hoewel de pandemie de manier van werken van velen in Nederland veranderde, had zij nauwelijks invloed op het dagelijkse werk van de Europese arbeidsmigranten die wij interviewden. Hun werk bleef gedurende de pandemie in het vleesverwerkende bedrijf of in het distributiecentrum plaatsvinden, met gedeeltelijke aanpassingen vanwege Covid-beschermingsmaatregelen. Uit het interviewmateriaal blijkt dat veel werknemers blij zijn met hun vaak fysiek zware werk, maar zich ondergewaardeerd voelen door hun werkgevers. Bijna geen van de geïnterviewde werknemers kreeg tijdens de pandemie specifieke zorg van hun werkgevers of van (mensen in) de Nederlandse samenleving met betrekking tot hun specifieke situatie en mogelijke behoeften. In plaats daarvan werden veel werknemers aan hun lot overgelaten: één nam ontslag om tijdens de schoolsluitingen voor de kinderen te zorgen; een ander voelde zich gedwongen een isolatieperiode te doorbreken om eten te kopen; weer een ander veranderde van baan om te ontsnappen aan de lakse invoering van beschermingsmaatregelen op de werkplek. We tonen dat de pandemie en de Covid-19-maatregelen verschillend werden ervaren, afhankelijk van de persoonlijke en gezinssituatie van de Europese arbeidsmigranten, hun sociaaleconomische achtergrond en beoogde toekomstplannen. We sluiten af met aanbevelingen voor een structurele verbetering van de positie van Europese arbeidsmigranten in Nederland, zodat zij *als werknemers* gewaardeerd worden voor hun structurele bijdrage aan de Nederlandse arbeidsmarkt. We stellen specifiek voor om 1) de waardering en erkenning van de positie van Europese arbeidsmigranten in het beleid te verbeteren, 2) de zorgplicht van werkgevers te versterken, en 3) de inspraak- en medezeggenschapsmogelijkheden en ondersteuning van Europese arbeidsmigranten te versterken. Dit is een publicatie van het interdisciplinaire onderzoeksproject 'Migranten in de frontlinie' dat de impact van de Covid-19 maatregelen op arbeidsmigranten in essentiële sectoren in Nederland onderzocht.

Sleutelbegrippen

Corona, essentieel werk, Europese arbeidsmigranten, werkervaringen, Nederland

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic brought the precarious position of many EU mobile workers[1] to the fore. Especially when virus outbreaks concerning large groups of meat workers, in the Netherlands, as well as worldwide, were brought to the public attention. With tightened workplace and non-workplace Covid-safety measures issued by employers, a government Taskforce looking into their situation, as well as heightened media attention for their plight, dire cases and issues concerning EU mobile workers were documented, and various efforts made to improve the situation. However, far less is known about how EU mobile workers that were not involved in dire situations, such as a bigger Covid-outbreaks at the workplace, perceived the corona-pandemic and related measures and restrictions. In this project, we therefore conducted in-depth interviews with 35 Polish and Romanian workers in the Dutch meat and distribution industries to explore how they experienced the pandemic.

The interview material presented in this paper displays the diverse experiences of these workers. While often considered a rather uniform group of workers, our interviews clarify a diversity of experiences, depending on personal preferences and future plans, contract types and relationships with employers, characteristics of living circumstances or duration of stay and familiarity with the Dutch institutional set-up. We broadly distinguish three different kinds of EU mobile workers: the more or less traditional 'economic' type, who moves abroad to earn (more) money; the 'family' type, who works and lives with family in the Netherlands; and the type that 'escapes' the home country in pursuit of new adventures or a change in career or life. We use this categorization not to narrow down the diversity of experiences of EU mobile workers to three different types, but to provide some analytical grounding, to highlight similarities in experiences while at the same time keeping the categorisation open enough to do justice to the variety of experiences of EU mobile workers, even within particular analytically defined types.

Most of the workers we talked to were happy to work in the often physically demanding jobs they perform, yet many expressed feelings of under-appreciation by their employers. Hardly any of the workers we encountered during our fieldwork mentioned to have received specific care from their employers, or from (people in) Dutch society during the pandemic regarding their specific situation and possible needs.

1 In this paper, we use the term EU mobile workers to refer to workers, in particular Polish and Romanian nationals, who work in the Netherlands performing low-waged, "essential" jobs using their EU freedom of movement rights. This does not align with the term used in the Dutch public and political debate, which is migrant workers ("arbeidsmigranten"). We prefer this term as it displays their position as citizens of the EU, and as such, their entitlement to engage in employment on the EU labour market under the Treaty of the Functioning of the EU and the EU Citizenship Directive 2004/38/EU.

Instead, many workers were left to fend for themselves: one resigned so she could take care of her children when Dutch schools shut down; another felt forced to break his Covid-isolation just to buy essential groceries to get by; yet another changed jobs in search for a workplace where Covid-measures were implemented and enforced correctly. Meanwhile other workers were not worried about a potential infection and found some of those measures at the workplace, such as wearing face masks all day, a nuisance. Others again were worried about a possible future vaccination requirement, which could potentially complicate international travel or maybe even employment opportunities. In this paper, we describe these and other experiences of the workers we interviewed in 2021. While this material is not intended to provide a full or representative overview of the experiences of EU mobile workers, the paper does provide insights into the lived experiences of a diverse group of EU mobile workers during the Covid pandemic, that till hereto have not often been documented.

This paper is structured as follows: section 2 briefly discusses our methods and data and introduces a selection of the EU mobile workers we spoke to with short profile stories. The following sections address the impact of the corona pandemic on EU mobile workers along four domains: work (section 3), housing (section 4), social life (section 5) and health (section 6). The experiences regarding access to (Dutch) health care are documented in De Lange et al. (forthcoming). The final section 7 concludes with recommendations based on the lived experiences of the interviewed workers.

2. Methods and the people in this research

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 35 Polish and Romanian meat and distribution workers in the Netherlands. These sectors were selected because they were flagged by the Dutch Labour Inspectorate in early 2021 as risk sectors for Covid-infection (Inspectorate SZW, 2021). The Polish and Romanian nationalities were chosen as they represent the largest groups of EU mobile workers in both sectors. The workers were interviewed in September and October 2021 via online or face-to-face meetings lasting between one to three hours. The interviewed workers were a subsample of the 153 workers surveyed between May and July 2021 (Berntsen, 2022), striving for an equal distribution of interviewees between the distribution and meat sector and a gender balance. The interviews offered an in-depth perspective into the workers' experiences of the Covid-pandemic and yielded additional insights into their lives, migration histories, and work experiences in the Netherlands.

The interviews were conducted at a point in time when the Covid-pandemic had been a daily and lived reality for the EU mobile workers for 1.5 years already. Different lockdowns with tightened and loosened Covid-measures including travel possibilities, changing testing facilities and vaccination options had come and sometimes gone

again, or been reinstated in the meantime. While the pandemic was indeed a lived reality for the workers, at the same time, the essence of their work - besides certain Covid-measures - had not changed drastically during the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic their daily routine largely persisted, as they continued to physically go to their workplace to perform their jobs. Many worked in then classified 'essential' jobs. For some workers we interviewed, Covid was not a prime issue in their lives and they were keener to talk about other issues that concerned them more: such as insecure work contracts, interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and employers, unsafe and unhygienic housing standards, or problems with health. In this paper we therefore emphasise that the question how EU mobile workers experienced the pandemic cannot be considered separately from how their work and lives are organised in the Netherlands.

The interviews were conducted in Polish and Romanian, by interviewers with the same nationality as the respondents, so that the workers could be approached and interviewed in their native language. A topic guide structured the interview conversations around central themes such as work, living situation, health and health care, corona measures, social life, and future plans. How workers experienced the impact of COVID in these areas was the central focus of the interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and translated by the interviewer who conducted the interview. The interview transcriptions were thematically analysed, using the previously mentioned central themes.

To ensure anonymity of the interviewees, we use pseudonyms and if needed disguise place names and other potentially identifying details. This study aims at highlighting the experiences of EU mobile workers, rather than to establish generalizable facts, and lays no claim to being representative for all EU workers. Rather, we present empirical data on an underrepresented perspective on the living and working conditions of EU mobile workers during the covid pandemic.

2.1 A heterogenous group

To acknowledge, at least some of, the diversity in background, experiences and drivers of the people who in many publications are simply grouped together under the heading '*arbeidsmigrant*' (migrant worker), we introduce in this section a selection of life-stories of the people we interviewed for this study. As we will show further on in this paper, their backgrounds, perspectives, motivations, hopes and strategies play a role in how they experienced and dealt with corona measures and regulations. Even though all the workers interviewed are considered part of the group of '*arbeidsmigranten'* in the Netherlands, we show that the pandemic impacted workers in different ways.

We broadly distinguish 1) the more or less 'classic' *economically* motivated worker, who works in the Netherlands to earn (more) money; 2) the *family* worker, who lives and works with partner and children in the Netherlands (or plans to bring them over) and also plans for a future in the Netherlands; 3) the worker who has not moved to the Netherlands for work primarily, but rather to *escape* a certain situation in their lives prior, such as a personal loss, a divorce, or an urge to pursue new adventures in a career or life change. While there are many ways to characterise differences within the group of EU mobile workers (cf. Engbersen *et al.*, 2014), we found this three-way categorization to best reflect the differential experiences of the pandemic among the workers we interviewed. With this categorization we build upon migration research that characterises types of mobile workers based on different aspirations and intentions to move (cf. van Meeteren, 2014 on irregular migrants).

While we placed the EU mobile workers we interviewed in one of these three categories, workers are not fixed within them. Some moved to the Netherlands initially because of financial considerations, yet stayed along over time, meanwhile deciding to settle and build up a family future in the Netherlands, thereby changing from an economically motived worker to the category of a family worker instead. We illustrate the categories with profile stories of a selection of the workers we interviewed in this study (see the appendix for a table overview of all interviewees) to highlight some of the similarities and diversity in the life stories and experiences of the different types of workers.

2.2 Economically motivated workers

Many EU mobile workers initially move to work abroad for economic considerations. The wages that can be earned in the Netherlands, though perhaps in the lower pay scales in the Netherlands, are still substantially higher than the average wage levels in Poland and in Romania. Though intentions may change over time (as we also show in the worker stories we profile below), initial moves to the Netherlands are often set-up and thought about in a temporary manner. Many of the workers associated to this 'type', live indeed in employer-arranged accommodations, which tend to be set up to accommodate the temporary nature of these workers' stays. However, many remain in such arrangements even when their stays get extended over years. The predominant dependence on the employer, not only for housing and work, but also often for information (including information on general Covid measures) and assistance (to access health care), feeds into the often precarious and isolated position of these workers in the Netherlands.

Magdalena is a 35 years-old Polish woman who moved to the Netherlands in January 2021. Due to the lockdown in Poland, she could no longer earn money in her retail sales job, nor via occasional waitressing. Therefore, Magdalena decided to leave the

small village where she lived to find work abroad. Without previous knowledge about the working reality in the Netherlands, she started to work in a fruit sorting plant. Since her arrival in the Netherlands, she has switched jobs several times, working in agriculture, distribution centres and meat companies. Magdalena is a sweet and friendly person who easily trusts people, which has sometimes been used against her, with her ending up in precarious situations. Her working relations never lasted long enough for her to develop a sense of belonging or power. She has only ever worked on phase A contracts[2] and lost jobs for a variety of reasons. From her work at a meat cutting belt, she developed a muscle inflammation caused by the repetitive movement that came with the job she had to do all day. When she visited a general practitioner with this inflammation, she found out that she was not insured, even though she had told her employer earlier that she needed insurance. In fact, her employer – a temporary work agency – fired her only a few days later, after which she was forced to leave the agency-arranged accommodation within a few hours. Due to her injury, Magdalena could not find another job immediately, and ended up sleeping in the streets for a few days.

Aurel is a 21-year-old meat production worker who arrived in the Netherlands in July 2019. After losing his job and income in Romania, he was ready to leave his country and the low earnings behind and joined a friend who already worked in the Netherlands. Aurel has a playful approach to life and is not too worried about much else than the here and now. In the 2 years he lived in the Netherlands, he changed jobs already half a dozen times, mostly rotating between agencies that hire people to work in the meat industry. When the pandemic started, he worked in a poultry slaughterhouse and lived in a house that had no internet access nor a TV connection, in a remote town in Gelderland. When the pandemic broke out, he was quite uninformed about it, making the whole pandemic feel like a rather abstract and distant thing, at least during that period. Also, no COVID-protection measures were implemented at his accommodation back then. In general, Aurel never got too worried too much about getting a COVID-infection. When he tested positive on COVID, he had to isolate for two weeks with other infected colleagues. This time in isolation, felt like being imprisoned. While in isolation, the food supplies provided by the temporary work agency were too small: one bag of food per two people was brought every three days. The workers in isolation tried to portion the content of the bags among each other, though felt it was not enough. Aurel eventually went to get groceries himself during his isolation, to get more food.

2 The first phase of a temporary agency contract lasts maximally 78 weeks. If an agency clause (uitzendbeding) is included, the employer can terminate the contract at any time (during the first 26 weeks of employment). The worker has no or very few guaranteed hours and is only paid for the hours worked.

Elena is a 34 years-old Romanian woman who moved to the Netherlands with her husband in May 2017. Shortly after arrival, they both found jobs in a big meat plant via a temporary agency. Together with her husband, she has worked at the same place ever since. Although she did not change her job for more than four years, Elena still works on a phase A agency contract, that can be terminated within one day. She and her husband share a room in an employer-arranged hotel, where they share a bathroom with two colleagues, and prepare meals in a kitchen that is shared with dozens of workers of different nationalities. They feel stigmatized because of their Roma background and have a hard time making friends. Their social network is small, and they know few people that they could turn to in case they would need help or information. Elena hopes to one day find private accommodation. Although she misses her children in Romania very much, she cannot visit them more than once a year. Her and her husband's earnings simply do not allow for more frequent visits. Elena got quite frightened when she heard from colleagues that people who caught a Covid-infection, where brought to an unknown place and would never return to work. Elena remained scared throughout the pandemic for the consequences of catching a Covid-infection, though not because of the health implications. She worried that a Covid-infection would be reason for the temporary work agency to fire her, and evict her from the accommodation. When she caught a cold once, she did not call in sick, but went to work anyway, so as not to risk such consequences.

Mikołaj is a 23 years-old Polish worker in a big meat plant who arrived in the Netherlands during the pandemic, in August 2020. Having a hard time finding a job in the area around his home village, he followed his mother and sister's example and left the country to work abroad. Since his stay in the Netherlands, he has worked for the same agency and at the same meat plant. This has given him time to build up good relationships with his colleagues and supervisors. Mikołaj does not know many people outside of his work. Although he does not have much free time after his long workdays, he enjoys the occasional outings with his colleagues. If he would need support or information, he turns to his coordinators at work. Mikołaj has a baby son and a fiancée in Poland, whom he supports financially. Although he left home with the intention to work abroad only temporarily, he now enjoys life in the Netherlands and hopes to convince his family to join him. He would like to build up a life together in the Netherlands. Mikołaj feels very few consequences of the pandemic, as he rarely leaves his 'work-home-bubble'. What he does find annoying, is how inconsistently Covid-measures were introduced at his work, and even more so, the complete absence of any measures at all in his employer-arranged housing location.

Magdalena, Aurel, Elena and Mikołaj were all four motivated to move abroad by economic considerations. Yet, what Mikołaj's story illustrates, is how this temporary notion, changed after arrival into new plans to bring his wife and newborn over to build

up a future in the Netherlands. This illustrates the inherently changing nature of aspirations to move. It also shows how EU mobile workers, who at one point in time seem clearly 'economically' motivated, may over time change their aspirations towards prioritizing family goals for instance. This is the next category of workers.

2.3 The 'family' workers

For workers whom we consider 'family' workers, an important motivation to come or to stay in the Netherlands is to live together with their families. Some workers immediately came with their family, others brought their families over only after working in the Netherlands for some time, and yet another group tries to bring their family over in the near future. What they share is a perspective to settle down in the Netherlands, at least for the foreseeable future. All 'family' workers with children in the Netherlands live in private accommodations, though we also encountered workers who live together with a partner in employer-arranged housing, sharing facilities with colleagues. Compared to the previous group, 'family' workers tend to be more connected to Dutch society, for instance because children go to Dutch childcare or schools, they usually live in the Netherlands for several years, and express more concerns about secure and predictable working conditions.

Bogdan is a 59-year-old former butcher, who left his home country together with his wife in 2004 when many businesses in Poland closed down. Since his move to the Netherlands, he has worked at the same Dutch meat plant, though has been employed via different temporary agencies. Even after 17 years at the same meat plant, both Bogdan as his wife are still employed on temporary agency contracts. Quite quickly after moving to the Netherlands, they rented a little studio in a bigger apartment complex. In their first years there, Bogdan enjoyed his contact with his young Dutch neighbours. They would meet up to barbecue on occasion, or watch a football match together. This also helped Bogdan to learn Dutch. Over the years, these neighbours all moved away. Nowadays, it is mostly other foreign workers who live in the building, and they stay usually only for a few months. Bogdan awaits his pension, and has put his social life in the Netherlands on hold. He and his wife plan to move back again to Poland, where they have a house. They visit their families as much as they can and look forward to being closer to their sons and grandchildren again. When the pandemic started, Bogdan and his wife were worried and did not want to go to work before some safety measures were introduced. Bogdan has diabetes, and feared the consequences of a COVID-infection. When they returned to work, they asked for hygienic masks, which were not mandatory at that point. Later on, his wife became one of the COVID-officers at work. She checks if corona measures are adequately followed at work, provides information and hands out material to colleagues.

Nicoleta is a 39-year-old Romanian meat worker who lives in the Netherlands together with her husband and their teenage son. Nicoleta moved to the Netherlands twice, once in May 2018 and then again in March 2020, just one week before the pandemic broke out. She had returned to Romania for some time in between so that her son could start high school there, while her husband stayed in the Netherlands. Both Nicoleta and her husband had stable jobs in Romania but decided to work abroad when their nephews told them about the earnings they made in the Netherlands. Both work for the same meat processing company since their arrival in the Netherlands. They started there on temporary agency contracts, yet recently received direct employment contracts with the meat company. Nicoleta wants to stay and work in the Netherlands till she reaches retirement age. They also see their son's future in the Netherlands. Besides the financial benefits, Nicoleta finds her life in the Netherlands easier than in Romania. Nicoleta spends her spare time mostly with a group of Romanian friends. They are also her go-to when she needs information about how things work in the Netherlands. Nicoleta was happy that she lived in the Netherlands during the Covid-pandemic, because the measures were less strict than in Romania. Although she was not too worried about an infection from a health perspective, she eventually got a vaccine so she could avoid quarantine and other travel impediments when visiting her family in Romania.

Helena, a 28-year-old Polish woman, moved to the Netherlands in April 2019 together with her two children, to join her husband who started a job in the Netherlands already a few months earlier. Helena did not have accessible childcare in the small Polish town she lived. Her move was therefore also a chance to get back to work. Helena values personal development and always wanted to learn new languages. She believes that her children enjoy a better education in the Netherlands and therefore, would have an easier future. When the pandemic started, Helena worked as a temporary agency worker in a company that experienced a massive drop in production. She consequently lost her employment and struggled for months to find a job that allowed her to combine work and childcare. The closures of schools and child care facilities were especially challenging to Helena. She eventually found a meat processing company that offered her the work conditions she desired: a direct employment contract with regular working hours. She was soon promoted in the company, after she had taken up supervisory tasks when the company faced Covid-outbreaks among its staff. Helena is happy at her job, where she feels appreciated.

2.4 The 'escape' workers

The defining characteristic of the workers in this category is formed by the reason to leave their home country and stems from a personal circumstance. The initial idea to move is motivated by a wish to *escape* a previous situation, and not primarily to find

a job abroad. Situations that made workers leave their country were for instance a divorce, a sudden death in the family, or a wish to pursue a different career or live abroad. The workers' aspirations are less defined, and their attitude towards work and the working conditions more light-hearted, as their move, at least initially, is not part of a pre-defined plan, their purpose of moving foremost being related to gain new experiences, instead of monetary considerations. Yet, also for these workers, a fluid and open attitude may be subject to change over time. For some, settling in the Netherlands and building a better position for themselves became a motivation only after arrival and having worked in the Netherlands for some time.

Dragoș came to the Netherlands after dropping his studies in Romania in June 2019, when he was 19 years old. He started to work as an order picker and now works as recruiter for a temporary work agency. Although Dragoș was in a good financial situation in Romania, he realised his career options were limited in Romania and decided to leave to pursue a better future abroad. His initially wanted to go to a Nordic country, but found more work possibilities in the Netherlands, and landed here. Soon after his arrival in the Netherlands, he fell in love with a Dutch woman and they bought a house together in the summer of 2020. Buying a house became a possibility, because Dragoș got a permanent contract with the temporary agency. He now feels he is slowly settling in here. Throughout the pandemic, he expected to sooner or later catch a COVID-infection, because of the way the work is organized in the distribution centre where he works, where it is impossible to keep a safe distance from colleagues at all times. Even though Dragoș believes that the employer took all necessary and possible measures to prevent COVID-transmissions in the warehouses. In the first year of the pandemic, he did not travel back to Romania, because tests were too expensive and vaccinations not available yet. Dragoș eventually got vaccinated on one of his visits to Romania, because the waiting periods for his age category in the Netherlands were much longer than in Romania. Dragoș sometimes feels ashamed of being a Romanian, because of type of work that Romanians and Polish people do in the Netherlands. He feels he is more appreciated now that he has a job position that is done by Dutch people as well, rather than a job that is reserved for EU mobile workers only.

Nicolae, a 30-year-old Romanian order picker, arrived in the Netherlands during the pandemic, in October 2020. Before moving to the Netherlands, he had an office job in Greece. When a friend of his asked him to also move to the Netherlands, Nicolae decided to give it a go, as he was looking for new experience. Nicolae initially planned to find an office job in the Netherlands too, but soon realised that was not realistic, as it is hard to find a permanent job or private accommodation in the Netherlands. Nicolae has been worried about getting a COVID-infection. By reading official information channels, he keeps himself up to date and he always follows safety measures as well as possible. Not wanting to risk anyone's health at work, Nicolae called in sick

whenever he had any COVID-related symptoms. He would await his test results and return to work only when he was certain that he was not COVID-positive, usually after one or two days on a sick leave. Only later, he discovered that with his temporary contract, sick pay only starts after the third day of absence. Both at work and in the employer-arranged accommodation, Nicolae feels unsafe because COVID-safety measures are not well-implemented. He especially felt at risk when people who were supposed to quarantine – either upon arrival from abroad or after contact with infected people – would share the same facilities as him and others in the accommodation, thereby ignoring the official quarantine rules.

Irena is a Polish woman of 56 years. Back in Poland, she had a well-paid job, a vivid social life, and her own apartment in which she lived together with her cat. When she lost both her partner and father to tragical circumstances, she found herself unhappy and depressed for several years. Urged by a wish to break out from her usual environment, she decided to leave Poland in September 2019, in search for new experiences. She quickly found a job in the Netherlands as order picker in a warehouse. At first, she lived in a shared accommodation arranged by the temporary work agency that hired her. As she felt 'a little too old' to still be sharing a kitchen with others, she searched via social media for private accommodation, and soon found a private room, and later a private apartment that she still rents. Irena is highly educated, outspoken, and assertive, and likes to be in charge of her own situation. In spring 2021, Irena caught a bad cold and tried to ignore it at first. Eventually, she tested positive and as her health state deteriorated badly, she was taken to the hospital by ambulance, with an oxygen mask. In the hospital, Irena was extremely worried about potential hospital costs. Yet, no one in the hospital could give her reliable information on cost coverage, even though Irena has Dutch health insurance.

After highlighting some of the diversity and similarity in the life-stories and experiences of EU mobile workers, we now turn to discuss the workers experiences during the pandemic in the fields of work, housing, social life and mobility and health.

3. Work

The majority of EU mobile workers in the Netherlands work on a temporary agency contract. This is reflected in the survey sample of this research, as 85 per cent of the EU mobile workers worked on a temporary agency contract at the time we surveyed them (Berntsen, 2022). These contracts and the way in which work is organised play an important role in how the workers experienced the pandemic. Therefore, in this section we first discuss (1) the work contracts and (2) the organisation of work.

3.1 Work contracts

Temporary and temporary agency contracts bring along insecurity for workers, in the work sphere, and more broadly. In this section we discuss 1) job losses due to flexible contracts; 2) unpaid quarantine periods; and 3) complicated childcare arrangements.

3.1.1 Job losses due to flexible contracts

The flexible nature of the employment contracts that many EU mobile workers work on made discontinuing the employment relation easy during the pandemic, from the employers' side, yet also, as we show, from the workers' side. Contract dissolvements occurred especially in the first months of the pandemic. When EU mobile workers in non-essential jobs were laid off with the outbreak of the pandemic, many soon after found employment in 'essential' jobs, where demand for workers continued. For others, the pandemic did not result in job loss directly, but foremost affected their career progression: temporary or agency contracts were not followed-up with (previously promised) permanent positions in the company, but with sudden dismissal or with the continuation of the existing temporary or insecure job contract.

This was the case for 28-year-old Adam, a former engineering student from Poland who works as a machine operator for a prestigious car company. To him, the outbreak of the pandemic resulted in a missed opportunity to be directly hired by the car company, which had a significant impact on his career development. Just before the pandemic broke out, arrangements regarding his employment switch from temporary agency worker to direct employee, were initiated. He awaiting the response from the car company's headquarters, when the pandemic hit, putting a stop to his employment transfer. Adam felt this as a big loss he endured because of the pandemic. Where Adam could continue his work at the same car company, though not in the permanent position he was promised, other workers lost their jobs, regardless of earlier promises for career progression. Helena, a 28-year-old Polish production worker, lost her job when the pandemic broke out, due to a sudden fall in demand at the production company where she worked via a temporary agency firm. Similar to Adam, Helena was promised a direct contract with the production company before the pandemic, though the transfer process was not initiated yet. Helena was shocked and embarrassed that instead of being promoted to a contract with better conditions, she lost her job from one day to the other.

Where the pandemic, especially in the early phases, resulted in sudden job losses for temporary agency workers especially; as the pandemic continued, the career progression of other workers was interrupted when employers refrained from extending more secure employment contracts.

3.1.2 Unpaid quarantine

While the government and employers' associations encouraged employers to pay employees during quarantine, insecurity persisted regarding entitlement to quarantine payment especially concerning agency workers. While quarantine[3] , in theory, should not entail financial risks for workers, in practice, it did for some agency workers. Especially for workers with a so-called agency clause (*'uitzendbeding')* in their contracts, quarantine was not always paid. In other cases, workers were not paid by their employer, but had to take holidays instead to cover their quarantine period, in order to maintain financial continuity. With earnings around a living wage level, a discontinuance in income (due to an unforeseen, and unpaid, quarantine period) becomes problematic quickly, when rent or mortgage payments continue. Some workers had to cut their quarantine short, just to be able to earn income to be able to cover their rent. Zygmunt, a 50-year-old Polish meat worker, cut his quarantine after travel one day short, only to avoid going into debts with his agency for not being able to pay the rent. After his rent deductions, Zygmunt's salary at the end of the quarantine week was a bare 15 cents in total.

The fear of earning too little to cover basic needs, urged some workers to avoid quarantine, sometimes at all costs. This meant that in some cases, migrants preferred not to quarantine themselves after (holiday) travel or after being in contact with someone infected. Some kept possible covid-infections secret, avoided being tested, all in order to continue to work and keep a more or less steady income. The 35-year-old Magdalena understood why people feared having to quarantine:

> *"I UNDERSTOOD THAT, BECAUSE OF COURSE EVERYONE, WHEN ONE IS ON QUARANTINE THEN OF COURSE ONE DOES NOT GET MONEY, RIGHT? BECAUSE THEY WERE TAKING MONEY FOR THE APARTMENT, BUT THE SALARY DID NOT ARRIVE."*

An unpaid quarantine period was especially harsh for workers who arrived for the first time in the Netherlands and had to quarantine before they could start their new job. That forced workers to start their job with a debt for the rent with the agency that both employed and accommodated them.

Complying with the government-prescribed quarantine period, without getting paid, was difficult for some EU mobile workers. Some workers refrained from calling in sick, to maintain a basic level of income, while others went into debts, simply by abiding to the prescribed quarantine period and endured the financial set-back. The unpaid

3 www.rivm.nl/coronavirus-covid-19/quarantaine-en-isolatie; www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-tijdlijn

quarantine periods were especially problematic for workers with a mobile lifestyle, who crossed EU borders frequently, as we discuss further below.

3.1.3 Closed schools and childcare

While many EU mobile workers work in the Netherlands without having their family with them, some actually do live with children in the Netherlands. For them, the pandemic brought along an extra set of challenges regarding childcare.

For parents performing essential occupations, childcare was organised during the second and third period of school closures in the Netherlands.[4,5] Yet, many EU mobile workers worked in jobs that did not qualify as 'essential' work, even though remote work was not possible, and their work continued at the workplace throughout the pandemic.

Anna, a 28 years-old Polish distribution worker had worked for the same company for two years when the pandemic started. Although Anna's job in a warehouse of light bulbs continued during the pandemic, her work was not qualified as 'essential', because the products she handled were non-food items. In the Dutch context, work in distribution warehouses for food (or medical supplies) was considered essential, but non-food distribution was not – even though the resulting inability to work from home was the same. When schools and childcare closed, Anna's son did not qualify for the childcare organised for parents in essential occupations, as she explained:

> *"If this would be the food sector or (...) cleaning of (...) health institutes, things like that, then the child would certainly have received care. But this was a job that was not essential (...) Because this is a warehouse with light bulbs, so the world would not collapse without it. [laughs]"*

Also, Anna's partner was not considered an essential worker, yet unable to continue his work remotely and needed to physically go to the workplace. As one of them needed to stay home with their son, Anna first took up paid holidays, followed by unpaid leave and eventually asked her employer to not extend her contract, so that she could stay home and claim unemployment benefit. By that time, Anna worked on a direct contract and had established a good relationship with her employer and managers, and therefore felt secure enough to ask for that kind of support.

Also, for 28-year-old Polish production worker, Helena, organising child care during the school closures was challenging. When schools closed in spring 2020, her husband

4 Noodopvang voor kinderen van ouders met een cruciaal beroep en kwetsbare kinderen, rijksoverheid.nl, 14 december 2020.

5 www.rivm.nl/gedragsonderzoek/tijdlijn-maatregelen-covid

resigned from his job and stayed home with their two children, and she continued to work. Helena at that time was hired on a flexible contract, though was promised to get a more stable contract soon. However, two months after the pandemic started, Helena was dismissed, as we discussed above, because the company experienced a drop in production. Helena's husband immediately asked his previous employer for his job back, where they luckily still needed workers. In the months that followed, Helena struggled to find a job that she could combine with childcare. Eventually, she found a job she enjoyed, in a meat processing company. When she wanted to sign her two children up for childcare for essential workers, she got rejected with the explanation that only families with *both* parents in essential occupations were allowed to profit from these childcare arrangements. Devastated, Helena returned home, and once again looked up the information online. Her Dutch at that time was very basic, yet she still managed to read the official governmental announcement on this matter and realised that she had been misled by the municipal civil servant she spoke to. She then took all her courage and repeatedly asked for an admission of her children in the school and childcare for essential workers, this time receiving what she wanted.

> *"I replied that I was working in meat, right? She said that no, that there need to be two key occupations [meaning both parents]. But I said that we had looked it up before on the government websites how it was in fact. There was a paragraph, in black and white, that one is enough (…) I actually first of all started crying, then checked the information and then sent her a message only. I didn't want to meet her in person anymore. Because when I started feeling stressed, my language escaped somewhere. I automatically lost the words, I forgot them. (…) I left the place in tears and told myself that no, I would write an email, calmly, I will check first. And indeed…"*

None of the employers of the EU mobile workers with children we spoke to, helped the workers out by granting extra parental leave, easing working times, or other arrangements to help the workers combine their work and family life during the pandemic. Instead, workers with children in the Netherlands struggled to arrange childcare, especially when their work on-site was not qualified as essential, leaving regular childcare arrangements unavailable to them. This was solved by taking up paid or unpaid leave or resigning from employment to be able to take care of the children. Even when in essential jobs, workers were not always granted access to special childcare arrangements for essential workers.

3.2 Organization of work

During the pandemic, the way work is organized brings along specific COVID risks and defines workers' experiences of the pandemic. We particularly want to draw attention

to (1) the high number of (rotating) colleagues at the workplaces, (2) the lack of production process adjustments during the pandemic, (3) the at times poor implementation of covid-measures, and (4) the lack of voice workers experienced in their circumstances at work.

3.2.1 Workplace size – many colleagues

For workers employed in a distribution warehouse or big meat plant, any ordinary working day comes with an encounter of dozens, if not hundreds of colleagues that work on the same shift. Most of the workers we interviewed for this study worked in large-scale factories, with a total workforce of up to 1000 people, working in shifts of 100 people or more. Such large groups of workers working in the same shift complicated a correct follow-up of COVID measures at all times. Ioana, a 34-year-old Romanian meat worker, explained that while initiatives such as staggered shifts and reminders to keep a safe distance were introduced in order to limit contact moments between the workers, some safety measures would only be complied with in certain spaces. In other spaces, it was simply not possible to avoid contact, due to the high volume of people who work on the same shift. Also, Polish meat worker Mikołaj recalled that keeping a safe distance in the dressing rooms was no priority:

> *"They control that everyone has those 1.5 meters apart from each other and when we are all in the wardrobe... so let's say, you finish work and obviously, the second shift is coming, we are going, so then there is such a crowd that one stands next to the other, all squeezed. And then they stand there, but don't control the distance anymore then. This is contradictory."*

Another measure to reduce the number of contact moments among workers in the same shift, was to adjust shifts and break times. Shifts were split up to reduce the number of workers present at the same time on the work floor. Szymon, a 49 years-old Polish order picker who lives in Germany and works in the Netherlands, was happy about the split of his usual shift (before: 8.00 to 17.00) into two shifts (06.00 to 15.00 or 15.00 to 23.00), as this way, he felt he had more free time and could get more out of his day.

Jagoda, a 23 years-old order picker from Poland, was pleased that at her rather big working place, they not only adapted the shifts, but also staggered the breaks:

> *"Even the breaks were divided into certain groups. So I would only meet 15 people in one time during the break. But the company was much bigger. This was indeed very strongly divided. First of all, to these shifts and then also into groups for the breaks. So on the breaks I would literally be in contact with a few people only."*

However, not everybody we spoke to was as happy about these changes, as they did not always lead to safer situations. Workers reported about very short staggered breaks, with not enough time to eat, rest and get back to the work floor. Romanian meat production worker Emil found the short breaks so hard to cope with, that he skipped eating altogether and only used his break to make the needed toilet visit. Emil explained how fast time went by during such short breaks:

> *"You have 10 minutes. But in fact, you don't have 10 minutes, you have 5. You need to change the apron, everything – that takes almost 3 minutes – if you're fast. And when you're on a break with 150 people, you bunch up together (…) There's many of us. And we need to keep the distance. And you have 10 min of break. (…) What can you do in 10 minutes? You have to change, you have to wash your hands when entering and exiting, take your apron off, wash your hands… (…) and that's why I want to change my workplace. In the morning I can't eat at 8:20, but at 10:00 I would eat something. And I don't have time, because we all go out. Men and women go out, we need to keep the distance, there's that mask, distance… wash your hands… you go to the toilet, by the time you take the apron off, there's another one ahead of me… you get to the side!"*

Emil eventually considered changing his work place because of the very short breaks. Also, Adrian, a Romanian worker in distribution, complained that the measures reduced their break-time to almost nothing:

> *"It changed for the worse (…) they made 2 breaks of 20 minutes, so 20 and 20, but out of these 20 minutes basically you were left with 10 minutes of break. (…) Because of this, it being a huge building, I don't know how it was designed – we were doing about 5 minutes and another 5 minutes to return, from going to eat, 10 minutes. The break was 20 minutes in 2 times. So you didn't have time, I'm telling you how it was in reality. You didn't have time to eat, you didn't have time to have a coffee. The conditions were extremely difficult."*

This exemplifies conflicting norms due to corona: the norms for distancing and the norms on work breaks. Apparently, the company gave preference to avoiding contact between the workers by splitting up their breaks, understandable if you realize how important it is for the company to avoid infections. Yet, they neglected the workers' right to a useful break. It exemplifies how companies prioritized different norms in the organization of work during the pandemic.

3.2.2 'The show (production) must go on'

While some workers we interviewed mentioned that adjustments were made by the companies to the work process, many experienced little change in the work or

production process during the pandemic. Some workers even mentioned that the product handling was speeded up during the pandemic, because of heightened covid-related product demands (or shortages in available personnel). Bartek, a 28-year-old Polish worker in distribution, who lived in the Netherlands with his fiancée, and worked in the Netherlands since 2011 already, felt that nobody cared about their safety at work:

> *"There were some sort of regulations. The company was forced to introduce some sort of methods, to protect us from this infection, and so on. But, well... I can't say that those last two years changed the ways of our work or working style or work rhythm very much. All is simply continuing, with a few small exceptions, such as the disinfection gel, or an imposed distance - which nobody respects anyway and that is also not being enforced. But no, I can't say... nothing has changed much."*

Meat workers mentioned the difficulty to keep a safe distance at the conveyor belt, mainly because the belt tempo and workflow stayed the same as before the pandemic. The 59-year-old Bogdan, a Polish meat worker, explained that the belt's speed is such that if you miss a piece, you need to act quickly to still grab the missed piece. This implied coming in close proximity to the colleague that stands beside you on the processing belt. According to Bogdan and his wife, the high speed at which they need to process the meat at the conveyor belt, increased their risks of catching a covid-infection at work:

> *"They did a few things [covid-measures]. (...) It's only that this tempo remained, and in this lies the problem. But the tempo is there, has been there and... [laughs] will remain this way."*

In these and similar cases, the high work tempo forced workers to choose between safeguarding a safe distance or to keep up the work speed as their employer requires. Some workers mentioned that the production belt at the meat company where they worked was put at slower speed when external control was on site, so that everyone could perform their work at a safe distance at the belt – at least as long as an external party was present. This illustrates that it was not impossible to slow down the production process to safeguard proper distancing between the workers, but that many companies instead made the business choice to maintain the production speed.

In distribution centres, workers pointed out that the pressure to meet daily targets and productivity norms were in the way of compliance with covid-measures. Especially workers on agency contracts, felt such pressures as the continuation of their work and income depended on them meeting these targets. Filip, 28-year-old, arrived during the pandemic from Poland, and took up work as an order picker. He was

frequently reminded by his managers that if his productivity would be too low, he would be fired:

> *"FOR THE MOMENT, THIS WORK IS OKAY, BUT FOR A LONGER PERIOD IT IS ALSO JUST PHYSICALLY HARD, SOMETIMES ALSO MENTALLY, BECAUSE (…) SOMETIMES THEY ALSO TELL ME SOME THINGS (…). THE FIRST MONTHS WERE REALLY HARD. (…) THEY WERE TELLING DIFFERENT THINGS TO US, THINGS LIKE 'HOW LONG DO YOU WANT TO WORK HERE?', ON A DAY WHEN MY NORM WAS NOT THAT HIGH."*

Due to this pressure, Filip prioritised working at a high speed to meet the daily production targets, even if that meant coming in too close proximity of his colleagues, during his work as order picker. On top of that, the stress of meeting targets caused him mental health issues, which he tried to endure to avoid running into financial difficulties. Many workers in distribution explained that order picking cannot be done by keeping a safe (1.5m) distance from others all the time, as orders frequently need to be collected from the same spot by several workers at the same time. With the pressure to meet daily picking norms, there is no time to wait until no-one else is collecting items in the same spot. Polish warehouse worker Adam complained:

> *"WHEN ONE NEEDED TO PICK AND IT WAS REALLY BUSY, WELL THEN SUDDENLY NO ONE CARED ANYMORE ABOUT US STANDING THERE WITH THREE PEOPLE, TO COLLECT THE ORDER."*

Yet, we also interviewed workers who did feel safe at work, mostly due to the 1.5m distance they could keep between themselves and fellow colleagues, or because face masks were carried consistently at the production floor. Some big factories had a designated 'covid-officer' at the work floor, who was in charge of checking compliance with covid-measures such as safe distance during lunch breaks and constantly reminded passing groups of workers to keep their distance.

3.2.3 Insufficient implementation of COVID measures

While all factories, production halls or distribution warehouses where the EU mobile workers we interviewed worked introduced measures to prevent the spread of covid, the implementation of covid-rules and measures was not always consistent. Sometimes measures would be strictly implemented and enforced in working halls, but not in the hallways, wardrobes, or cafeterias, leaving infection risks for the workers.

As mentioned above, distancing was not possible during work at all times. Workers also mentioned that masks were not always worn consistently in the work areas, hallways, and break rooms, or throughout all departments. Instructions to put the mask on and take it off again a few meters further along, made some workers feel that measures were only introduced to superficially comply with government regulations, rather than to really ensure the workers' safety. As order-picker Szymon explained:

> *"In the beginning, it was a bit nerve-wrecking, but (...) we saw that this was also a slight scam (...) Because when you were entering the building, one needed to wear a mask, right? Later one needs to go through the canteen with the mask. But once you are sitting, you can take off the mask. Later we enter the halls and we put the masks on, after going down two stairs, we take the masks off, because we are at work. [laughs] When I am walking through the warehouse, then I am without a mask, because I am at work. But (...) part of the work lies in walking around with a scanner and you take out clothes from shelves. And it's not possible to avoid each other by 1.5m, whilst there no one would have masks on. So, I don't know, in the warehouse, the virus doesn't exist, but then on the stairs, it suddenly does. [laughs] So it was a bit of a mess, but also a bit funny."*

Not all workers we talked to, experienced a lack of safety in covid terms as problematic. Yet, others did feel unsafe. Some decided to (temporarily) stop going to work. This was the case for Polish meat worker Bogdan, who has diabetes and heard how dangerous a covid-infection might be for him. When the virus spread in the Netherlands, and Bogdan's employer failed to introduce enough measures to make him feel safe, he decided to take a two-week holiday, in order to avoid risking his health at work. However, postponing work was not an option for many workers, especially not for those who arrived more recently in the Netherlands, with more insecure job positions. Instead, many workers saw little other options than to accept the situation as it was. This is why Filip, who arrived in the Netherlands for the first time during the pandemic, decided to accept the risks as his foremost priority was to keep his job and maintain financial stability.

> *"If we are talking about the work itself, due to the fact that people were passing next to each other, well, one would need to live with an awareness that one can get ill."*

Filip lived with his wife and new-born in the Netherlands, and planned to build a future here with his family. He, thus, accepted the higher risk of catching a covid-infection at work, as he needs the job to realize his future plans.

The workers we interviewed thus experienced inconsistencies and some arbitrariness in the implementation and enforcement of covid-measures at the workplace. While a few workers, mainly those with more stable employment relations, managed to make arrangements themselves (taking up holidays, asking the employer to provide face masks), most workers felt there was little they could do regarding improper compliance with introduced covid-safety measures at work, and simply acquiesced to that.

3.2.4 Lack of voice in circumstances at work

None of the workers we interviewed felt able to voice possible concerns regarding (a lack of proper) implementation of covid rules. In fact, no one was consulted about the kind of measures they felt were needed or asked which measures they preferred at work. Aurel, a 21-year-old Romanian meat production worker, explained:

> *"We had to keep distance, (…) the mask around (…) the face, (…) and otherwise, (…) as they wanted, everything was done as they wanted. We had no influence."*

Instead of voicing their concern about covid measures, some chose for other strategies to cope. Polish meat worker Bogdan, as mentioned above, chose to take up holiday, and postpone work until the employer had introduced more and better covid-safety measures. Also 30-year-old Romanian order picker Nicolae, felt unsafe and feared to get a covid-infection from work. He followed the news closely and tried to avoid being in close proximity to others as much as possible at work, and at the employer-arranged home, where he lived with colleagues. Nicolae felt powerless to change anything to reduce the risk of getting a covid-infection. To him, as well as others, a lack of voice and influence on working conditions overall was something they simply needed to accept. Some even saw it as part of their strength to endure this, 'I take it as it is. I endure.' as Romanian Elena poignantly put it.

The lack of consultation and possibility to provide input regarding working conditions during the pandemic, is illustrative of the one-directional relationship that characterises the employment relations of many EU mobile workers: workers have no or an extremely limited voice in their working conditions. Romanian Sergiu, who liked to take a pro-active role at the workplace, offering advice or feedback to his superiors to improve the product handling, mentioned that this was not appreciated:

> *"(…) anyway, I was the kind of person who would offer feedback at almost every step. Because when I see mistakes, I'd like to try to fix them. But many times, the coordinators were not open to repairing these problems, even though such issues impact the way everyone works there."*

The pandemic has not brought any change in this regard: no-one we interviewed explained some form of workplace democracy mechanism through which they could share their experiences or share thoughts on how they would prefer to work during the pandemic.

3.2.5 Employer dependence and lack of accessible (social) support

Many EU mobile workers depend to a large extent on their employers. Particularly, coordinators at the worksite tend to have an important role to support EU mobile workers. On the support provided and received from coordinators we heard mixed

stories. While many received good assistance from coordinators, others mentioned the complete lack thereof. According to Romanian order picker Nicolae, much depends on the personal character of supervisors and how they relate to workers:

> *"Here we are talking about a relationship which a person can have with (…) several types of characters. A relation with team leader X can be very flexible, very fluid, very pleasant. With another one, it can be different. It depends on their character, and I think any person experiences this at the workplace."*

Polish Maja, on the other hand, mentioned to avoid asking coordinators for help in general:

> *"(…) I am a person that does not want to involve coordinators too much in my life, because I know they will do more harm than good. (…) Ehm, let me say it like this: I am not an ignorant, if I need anything I have a google search engine and I can look something up. I can communicate in English, on quite a good level. And if not, then I help myself with gestures. So, I manage. It's just that there are people who don't know this language and they really are screwed. But to me, a coordinator is not a person to whom I would turn for help, I'd rather go to the trade unions."*

As work takes up such a prominent place in the lives of many EU mobile workers, only few workers we interviewed see other places where they could reach out to in case they needed help. A trade union or NGO were options mentioned in response to hypothetical support scenario's, though the employer was mentioned much more frequently (Berntsen, 2022). Particularly remarkable was the prevalent lack of social support and trust experienced among the EU mobile workers themselves that came forward from the interviews. While some workers built up a social circle with reliable friends or moved here already together with their nuclear and extended families, others struggled to break from their social isolation in the Dutch context. Milena, a 24-year-old meat worker from Poland, for instance, complained about fellow citizens:

> *"There are no people who are helpful, in whatever. One can see that they are gossiping about everyone, especially the people in management. I mean the Polish of course; I have nothing to say against the Dutch."*

Also Polish order picker Zofia who worked in the Netherlands since 2007 and usually together with fellow Polish workers, shared a great disappointment with the way Polish people generally distrust each other, instead of being kind and supportive:

> *"People are full of envy, one after the other, the Polish. (…) They are so full of envy, that it's unbelievable. The Moldavians came and work like they want (…). Whilst the Polish, for f*'s sake, everyone is nagging."*

Also Czeslaw, a 62 years-old Polish meat worker who, in contrast to Zofia, moved to the Netherlands during the pandemic (in March 2021), expected more support from other people, and found himself isolated and unable to, for instance, find a private apartment, without the help of others:

> *"I turned for help to people that live here already for a longer time. For them to help me. Because there is this website, but one needs to know Dutch, one needs to call and make appointments, and one has to talk, right? (…) And so... no one wanted to help me! I didn't want this [help] for free, I would have even paid them!"*

Few workers experienced informal channels of support, let a alone a more organized community of support, from fellow, EU mobile, workers. While in theory many workers know about possible formal channels, such as a Labour Inspectorate, trade union, NGO, they could reach out to when they would need support, in practice, few workers actually do so. This, unfortunately, has not changed during the pandemic.

4. Housing

The experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic among EU mobile workers in the Netherlands differ depending on their living arrangements. Those workers that live in a privately arranged accommodation, experienced certain covid-measures, such as minimization of social contacts, in similar fashion compared to most people in the Netherlands. For workers living in employer-arranged accommodation, the pandemic was experienced as estranging (with rules and advises that did not match their situation very well) and isolating (given the specific geographical location of the accommodation sites).

In this section, we highlight these experiences, by first (1) paying attention to the characteristics of employer-arranged accommodation that is usually tied to an employment contract, (2) the mismatch between the COVID measures for 'households' and the workers reality of their 'household' in the Netherlands, and (3) the isolated living situation of the workers.

4.1 Employer-arranged accommodation

Living in an employer-arranged accommodation may contribute to higher risks of contracting Covid-19, basically because of the high number of people that live together

sharing facilities, the instability of living situations when rental contracts are tied to a work contract and when corona-measures are not well-implemented during the home-work commute organised by the employers and housing providers.

4.1.1 Crowded living situation

The living arrangements of workers housed by employers vary between small flats with only a few roommates to huge establishments, for instance in former monasteries or hotels, where facilities such as the kitchen, bathroom or toilet are shared with dozens or more people. During our fieldwork, we visited several housing locations, of varying size. While larger-scale establishments may be created to accommodate temporarily staying foreign workers, we interviewed several EU mobile workers who had resided in converted monasteries or hotels for multiple years. Romanian meat worker Elena, for instance, has worked in the Netherlands through the same agency for four years and still lived in a so-called 'worker hotel'. In this former hotel, she lived together with her husband in one room, and shared the kitchen with dozens of other workers. Some workers mentioned that they would like to move to places with more privacy, preferably something they could rent themselves, but failed to do so, even after working for more than two years in the Netherlands. Living in accommodations designed for temporary stays, seemed to be a permanent reality for many workers. During the pandemic, the sole fact that workers shared their accommodation and/or basic facilities with many others, increased the risks of covid-exposure, as minimization of social contacts is difficult when you interact on a daily basis with large numbers of people.

4.1.2 Flexible contracts linked to housing situation

Not only can the number of housemates of migrants living in employer-arranged housing be high, many workers are on top of that also confronted with frequent rotations of these 'housemates', leading to heightened risks of virus exposures. These frequent moves relate to the common practice of combined work and rental contracts, with workers having to leave the accommodation with the dissolvement of an employment contract. Even when an employment contract is continued, relocations between housing sites are not uncommon. Many workers felt they had no control over their housing situation: they had to move frequently even though they were still employed by the same agency. Zygmunt, a 50-year-old Polish meat production worker, only worked for one agency since he arrived in June 2020 in the Netherlands but has changed housing already six times. He does not enjoy this lack of stability:

> *"I can end up in a different [housing] location, right? I could end up back in the hotel where I was before. Or I could end up somewhere else. This can vary here... everything here is so mobile. For me this is a bit uncomfortable, because the moment one gets used to it, gets homey here, one changes location again."*

While the reason behind employer-initiated relocations of workers between accommodations are not always communicated or clear, sometimes relocations are done to solve conflicts that arise between housemates, which happen at times between different national groups of workers. Both Sergiu and Emil, two young Romanian workers, describe frictions between them and Polish people they lived with. They point out that the Polish are in a better position to safeguard their housing when conflicts at the accommodation occur. In the case of Sergiu, a fight between him and Polish people led to his relocation to a less comfortable accommodation, while his Polish flatmates could remain in the accommodation. In only eight months of living and working in the Netherlands, 28 years-old Sergiu moved three times. Czeslaw, a 62-years old Polish meat production worker is much older than many of his 'housemates'. He complained that every other week, someone else occupies the other bed in his 15 square meter room. He was worried about contracting the virus and was not vaccinated yet, due to his language barrier and lack of support at work.

Where people were advised by the government to minimize social contacts to avoid risks of virus exposure, the living arrangements, especially in large-scale buildings, such as hotels or monasteries, and common relocation practices made minimization of daily contacts for these groups of EU mobile workers hardly possible.

4.1.3 Work-home commute conditions

For those workers who lived in employer-arranged housing, transport for their commute from and to work was usually arranged by their employer, unless they had their own means of transport, or could carpool with housemates.

One of the covid-measures was the obligation to wear a face mask during (public) transport and thus required for the home-work commute when organised by the employer. For workers who work and live together with colleagues, the introduction of this measures during their joint commute did not always feel logical. Polish meat worker Mikołaj, 23-years-old, mentioned how people were wearing the masks during transport only in theory, as it did not make sense to them, since he travelled with his flatmates, with whom he spent time together at home without wearing a mask. Such lack of perceived logic of covid-measures undermined workers willingness to adhere to the precautions taken.

Another safety measure concerning worker transportation was a rule on the maximum number of workers per vehicle. We spoke to workers who mentioned that this maximum amount and safe distancing in commuter vehicles was correctly upheld. Some though mentioned that the employers did not always do so out of their own initiative. This was the case for Carol, a 30-year-old Romanian meat production worker. Carol's agency employer, for instance, was fined for not respecting the transport commute rules in Belgium (at that time it was a maximum number of four

people/vehicle). Only after the fine, the employer complied with the maximum number of employees per vehicle. A similar story was described by 34-year-old Polish meat worker Kinga, who worked directly for a big meat processing company. She explained how her company needed to close one of their production sites for an entire day after the police controlled the commute conditions and noticed that the rules on the maximum number of people per vehicle were violated. After that, the company organized more cars, so that fewer numbers of workers travelled together in the same vehicle.

While many workers we interviewed did not bother about inadequate implementation of covid rules during transport, others did worry about inconsistent enforcement. Jagoda, a 23-year-old Polish student, worked in the Netherlands both in the summer of 2020 and of 2021 as order picker with the same agency firm. She, however, was disappointed to find out that the same employer, who in 2020 put great care into compliance with covid-safety measures, such as the maximum number of passengers per transport bus, let things slide in the following year, when the commute was no longer organised in such a safe way. This was particularly agonising to her, as she had chosen to return to the same agency twice in a row, precisely because of the proper and safe implementation of covid-measures during her first seasonal work period in the Netherlands.

4.2 Mismatch COVID-measures and EU mobile workers' 'households'

With the Temporary Act COVID-19 Measures introduced in the Netherlands in October 2020[6] everyone living at the same address, was considered to be one household, within which social distancing was not needed. This generic definition of a household, however, is ill-suited to the living situations of those workers who reside in employer-arranged housing, especially on larger premises as we described above.

4.2.1 Implementation of generic covid rules to large worker households

Since the corona measures, such as what to do in case of infections, were all formulated for regular 'households', the generic measures were difficult to apply or implement to the 'household' situation of EU mobile workers living in (larger scale) shared housing conditions. Maja, a 26-year-old Polish distribution worker, who lived in a former monastery together with around 80 other workers, for instance, remarked that nobody paid attention to the no visitor rules, not the workers living in her house, nor the housing providers. In a few other places, no or hardly any covid-measures were implemented. Aurel, a 21-year-old Romanian meat worker, who at that time lived in a very remote housing location, told us that no measures at all had been taken there,

6 Tijdelijke wet maatregelen COVID-19, Staatsblad 2020, 441.

making the pandemic feel very distant and irrelevant to him and his housemates. Aurel did not experience the lack of covid-measures taken in his surroundings as problematic, nor did he miss having access to information regarding the general covid-measures in the Netherlands. Some workers felt they simply had to accept being unable to live and work safely from a covid-point of view. Romanian distribution worker Sergiu phrased this as follows:

> *"We would share a kitchen and a bathroom. So from a corona safety point of view... that didn't exist [laughs]."*

A few mentioned that they looked for another agency, in the hope to also find accommodation that would be safer from a covid-point of view. No worker we interviewed asked their employer to change their living conditions or asked to be relocated to another, safer, location. If workers were bothered by the lack of covid-measures taken or covid-arrangements made in the accommodation, they generally did not voice such concerns but accepted the situation as it was instead.

4.2.2 Quarantine but no quarantine

The quarantine rules and guidelines during the pandemic were all tailored to and only referred to the 'household' as an entity. In large-scale accommodations, where kitchens are shared with dozens of workers, the official advice to quarantine the whole household, after one member of the household is infected, was not something that could be easily implemented, according to the workers we interviewed.

We heard of different cases where people that were supposed to quarantine, for instance upon arrival in the Netherlands, where accommodated with others that were not in quarantine, shared the same facilities, such as the kitchen or bathroom. Romanian order picker Nicolae worried about his exposure to contract covid due to the lack of proper quarantine adherence:

> *"The workers who need to be quarantined, separately from others, were placed together with other workers, and those people were put at risk."*

Polish meat worker Mikołaj described a similar scenario, when he had to quarantine after holidays abroad:

> *"This was a quarantine of three days, but anyway I was in the accommodation with the people that went to work normally, and I had this quarantine only to put it on paper... so just to say that I had had it, right?"*

Also Magdalena, a Polish meat worker, felt that her quarantine, was not proper quarantine at all:

"THIS QUARANTINE WAS ONE WHERE I ACTUALLY COULD WALK AROUND NORMALLY AND GO EVERYWHERE, SO THE QUARANTINE IN FACT DIDN'T EXIST."

Workers thus highlighted limited employer provided space for proper quarantine, leading to people being in quarantine, while still being in close contact (by sharing facilities) with others who did not have to quarantine, leaving the effectiveness of such quarantine practices in doubt. The interviews were conducted at a time when the quarantine rules were still quite strict for households.

4.3 Isolation aggravated

Housing locations for EU mobile workers are not always easily accessible, and some are located very remotely, with a lack of accessible or close-by public transportation possibilities. When workers do not have their own means of transport, living remotely, especially during the pandemic, complicated workers' access to basic supplies.

4.3.1 Consequences of geographical isolation in times of Covid

Some workers we spoke to live so remotely that the closest shops are kilometres away. During the pandemic, these remote locations isolated them even further. During early spring 2020, Romanian meat worker Aurel lived in an area so remote that he did not even have access to internet. Due to that, he and his housemates did not have access to information on covid-regulations either. For that, he did not feel affected by the pandemic at all in the beginning:

"IF YOU BELIEVE ME, I WAS IN AN AREA AND I HAD NO ACCESS TO TV, I HAD NO ACCESS TO THE INTERNET, IT WAS A SMALL VILLAGE, SO... NO, IT WASN'T AS AFFECTED AS A BIG CITY, SO WE WEREN'T AFFECTED, WE DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING, WE DIDN'T HAVE NEWS!"

When the shops were not only far away, but also shut earlier or entirely because of covid-measures, buying basic supplies became an even bigger challenge. In some of the housing locations, ordering groceries or take away food online was not possible, as food delivery services would not cover those remote areas. Also, ordering non-food items was not possible, when workers had no(known) address, when the receptionist of the accommodation site refuses to accept personal deliveries on their behalf, or when it was in general forbidden to order things to be delivered to the accommodation site.

Hence, when shops were closed, some workers could not buy essential items (for both private and professional use). Meat workers Elena and her husband were, for instance, unable to buy warm clothes to wear to work - in the meat plant where temperatures were around 4 degrees:

"Everything was closed, and we needed to get stuff for work… clothes, to buy (…) sweaters, pants, trainers for work… [to keep warm]"

The shop closures also put Paula, a 30-year-old Romanian warehouse worker who rented a room from her employer, in an uncomfortable position. When she moved into the housing arranged by her new employer, she was not given any bed linen, and was unable to order any due to the lockdown. Paula recently arrived in the Netherlands, had no Dutch bank card yet and could not buy anything online without it. She had to wait a few weeks before she could buy any bed sheets, when the stores in the Netherlands reopened by appointment. Paula lived in an accommodation that is so cut-off that she needed to walk 40 minutes to the closest bus station.

While the above-mentioned people were especially impacted by the lockdown due to the specifics of their employer-arranged housing, other workers like Romanian meat worker Iona, or Polish warehouse workers Jaroslaw or Szymon, who live in privately rented apartments, experienced less issues as they could simply order things online to their home addresses.

4.3.2 'Total' isolation for Covid-infected

As discussed earlier in this paper, quarantine facilities were not always capable to truly quarantine workers. Other workers were, instead, brought to different locations specially organized to isolate workers with a covid-infection. Kacper, a 42-year-old Polish meat worker, thought his temporary agency employer arranged his isolation period well: he was brought to a remote location together with other covid-positive colleagues and received essential groceries, and was paid for the time he spend in isolation. While Kacper's was a good experience, others experienced less accommodating arrangements and missed being taken care of during the period of isolation. Polish order picker Maja could stay in her usual accommodation when she tested positive for covid. Since she was not allowed at her housing location to order things online, she relied on her coordinator for food supplies during her period in isolation. Though Maja informed her coordinator that she was vegetarian, her dietary wishes were not respected by the person who brought her groceries.

Besides insufficient food supplies, a lack of medical assistance was mentioned several times by workers who were isolated in employer-arranged places. When Sergiu contracted Covid, he was moved to a separated location. The first days of his isolation, Sergiu did not have a blanket to sleep under. During isolation, Sergiu developed a fever and felt very ill, he suffered from being cold and dehydrated. He was eventually provided with paracetamol by his agency firm, although he asked to see a doctor to get more medical help.

Some workers even mentioned feeling forced to break their isolation to buy essential groceries or medicine. Romanian Sergiu shared that the agency promised to bring the workers necessary groceries during their period in isolation, but it did not have enough people to do so. Eventually, one of the people who was in isolation with Sergiu went outside to buy groceries, even though he was positive. One of our Romanian survey respondents, Mihai, a 25-year-old meat production worker, told us that two of his friends were only provided once with groceries by their agency employer in their two-week isolation. One of his friends eventually left the quarantine location to buy food and when the agency learned about this, they fired both him and his friend. In this case, the employer not only failed to care to provide a basic amount of food for those in isolation, but the agency also punished the workers afterwards by dismissing them. The extreme dependency of the workers on the granted care by the agency employer, also in times of a covid infection, thus backfired to the workers' detriment.

5. Social life and mobility during the pandemic

While the pandemic and the COVID-19 safety measures impacted social life of everyone in the Netherlands in an encompassing sense, the measures did not affect EU mobile workers all in the same way. How workers experienced the impact of the pandemic depended to an important extent on their socio-economic situation and personal circumstances. In the following, we discuss some of the impact of the pandemic on the workers' social life (1) and their mobility (2).

5.1 Social life

When it comes to the impact of the pandemic on the social life of the EU mobile workers, our interviewees either pointed out that they missed the lack of social interaction caused by the closure of restaurants, bars and shops, or that their social life in fact did not change that much under the COVID measures, as their social life pre-pandemic was already quite minimal.

5.1.1 Missed social interaction

Some EU mobile workers experienced the lockdown with its restrictions such as limited numbers of visitors in the house, closed bars and restaurants and sport facilities not unlike most Dutch citizens. While they missed social events and outings, the importance of being able to engage in such social life in the Netherlands was for many of them of broader importance. This was especially the case for those workers who moved to the Netherlands with the intention to settle and build-up a future. The lockdown put a strain on their possibilities to go out, make new acquaintances and friends, and build up a social circle besides the work colleagues. The lockdown, in a way, put a hold on social network building and more broadly integration processes. The above

excerpt, from 26 years-old order picker Maja, illustrates her frustration when the lockdown put her social life on hold. After dropping out from her studies in Poland, Maja wanted to start a new chapter in her life. The fact that the lockdown limited her social life solely to interactions with her colleagues, who were also her housemates, in the employer-arranged accommodation, weighed heavily on her. Especially because she felt unable to identify with the mentality and lifestyle of the people she worked and lived with. She found the lockdown hard to endure:

> *"This was the beginning of the pandemic and they started to shut everything. This for me was tough. Because you know, if a person comes here from abroad, one does not have too many distractions, because this person does not know the language and cannot participate in the cultural life yet, one cannot develop so much. And suddenly, they shut down everything that I had, I don't know, all the bars and shops. And I was condemned to sit in the house, and for me that was horrible."*

Also 28-year-old Polish meat worker Helena, who moved to the Netherlands only a few months before the pandemic broke out, experienced the lockdown as alienating. Although she lived together with her husband and two children, she missed being able to make and meet friends in the Netherlands. Especially when she lost her job, due to production losses at the company where she worked, and in particular when she developed some mental and physical health issues after that.

While Maja and Helena felt challenged by the restricted social possibilities during the pandemic, Filip, a Polish distribution worker who moved to the Netherlands in January 2021, in fact appreciated the limited social possibilities, because it meant he would not be distracted by (costly) social gatherings and outings. Filip explains it as follows:

> *"Work and home, home and groceries, and nothing else. But in the beginning (…) one comes here and has not that much money at first, plus one also has to find an apartment and so on, and somehow get around first. (…) If all the restaurants and all the cultural places are open, and there are possibilities to go there and local people are all going there (…) But now everything was closed and nobody could go out, so actually I also did not feel such a need (…) and so this is something I felt was positive about moving here in such times."*

Where Helena and Maja expressed a miss of fundamental social interaction and distraction, Filip on the other hand appreciated this pandemic-void, allowing him time to build up a work routine and save up some money. In fact, not being tempted to go to potentially expensive social gatherings, was a welcome turn of events for Filip.

5.1.2 Little impact on the already limited social life

While social life changed drastically for many people during the pandemic, for some EU mobile workers, the curfew, or the closure of bars, restaurants and shops had little impact. For certain groups of EU workers, the daily routine takes place in such an encompassing work-home-bubble, that the lockdown hardly affected their social life. This holds especially true for those workers that live in employer-arranged accommodation, where living space and facilities are often shared with fellow workers.

Particularly those EU workers that work in the Netherlands primarily to earn money – either to save up or to send remittances back to their families – and notably those that live in remote, employer-arranged accommodations, there is – also in non-pandemic times - little time, energy, and money, let alone options, left for leisure activities after work. Days are simply filled with work, the commute, and rest. Even if interested, there is little time for building up a social life in the Netherlands, beyond the social interaction with fellow housemates, who are also often their colleagues. Even if there would be time, and opportunities, not everyone is interested in building up social connections in the Netherlands beyond the work-home-bubble. So when the pandemic limited such options, some hardly felt affected by that. Irena, an order picker from Poland, describes such lack of a real social life here and how because of that, various covid-restrictions hardly had an impact on her:

> *"I don't know what else you would like to hear from me, because... really, somehow... me, the pandemic in terms of limitations, those restrictions... well, I actually didn't feel that too much on a personal level, because I live here in a way that I go to work, I come back, I go to sleep (…) Because in fact there was no... because this is how we live here, right? Work, we come back home, work, we come back home..."*

Also, for the 42-year-old Polish meat worker Kacper, who lived in a former hotel, arranged by his employer, the pandemic's restriction hardly affected his social life in the Netherlands. Kacper described his daily routine which leaves limited free time next to his work and daily commute of one hour (one way):

> *"I usually arrive at the hotel at 14.30 o'clock… although today it was at 15h, because of the traffic jams. So I arrive at 14.30 and I go to the shop, I make sandwiches for dinner, for my wife and myself. My wife arrives from work. At around 17.30 we shower. And around 19.30 we go to sleep. (...) I usually wake up even before the alarm, at 2am or a bit before. But there was a time when I would wake up at midnight and couldn't fall back asleep anymore. (...) I start at 5am."*

Remarkably, among those workers who felt little limitations during the pandemic with regards to their social life, many lived in the Netherlands already for several years.

Both Kacper and Irena, for instance, arrived in the Netherlands before the pandemic broke out. And while Kacper lives with his wife in a hotel, sharing facilities with fellow workers, Irena at the time of the interview lived in a privately rented apartment that she found via social media.

5.2 Border closures, immobility and mobility during the pandemic

Whether EU mobile workers live in the Netherlands together with their nuclear family, have a lot of friends here, or none at all; whether they went abroad to earn money, or have a wish to settle in the Netherlands – being a mobile worker implies that at least part of one's family and friends live elsewhere, in a different country. Most EU mobile workers use their mobility rights, not only to move between EU Member States for work, but also to profit from the same legal framework to visit their beloved ones on a frequent basis. In the case of EU mobile workers, mobility is thus not just a legal attribute, but a reality that shapes their social life to lesser, or greater, extent.

During the pandemic, the initial border closures, and travel restrictions between Member States and later the establishment of Covid passports for travel and related restrictions on travelling back and forth between home and work countries impacted workers in various ways. We broadly distinguish two different ways workers dealt with the travel restrictions: either (1) by cancelling or postponing travel plans till restrictions would be lifted, or (2) by finding ways to travel back home despite restrictions to maintain their family life (especially in the case of parents with underaged children) or to maintain their previous mobile lifestyle.

5.2.1 Forced immobility on EU mobile workers

When in March 2020, Poland and Romania and other Member States introduced restrictions on border crossings and called on their citizens to ‘stay home’, this was the start of an uncertain and for some, particularly anxious, time. This was particularly the case for EU mobile workers that were accustomed to being able to freely move across borders between the EU member states, not only for work, but also to maintain their family ties and other social relations across EU nation states.

When the borders closed, some workers felt forced to stay and continue to work in the Netherlands, even though this meant risking not being able to travel across borders as easily as before the pandemic, and perhaps not seeing their families for a long time. Romanian meat worker Aurel, expressed how he felt during this first period, when he had to cancel his plans to travel back to Romania: ‘Horrible, horrible! Because I had plans and I realized that I had to stay locked up because of this covid. I didn't have a choice, of course, but I respected the rules.’ Similarly, 47-year-old meat worker Alexandru, who had a wife and children in Romania, felt embittered about not being able to travel back home for devastating family circumstances. During the pandemic,

both his sister and mother-in-law passed away and his mother needed a cancer surgery. He was unable to travel back to Romania to attend the funerals, or to assist his mother undergoing medical procedures.

Not long after the initial border closures, mobility became possible, yet was still impeded by quarantine measures or test certificate requirements. As many of the costs of abiding by such measures fell down to the workers themselves, travel options remained quite limited for many, previously very mobile workers.

The 49-year-old Romanian Alina, who works in the Netherlands since 2018, and before that, for ten years in Italy, was used to visiting her family every four months. Since the pandemic, however, she was only able to return to Romania once. Alina had to miss her brother's wedding and her son's marriage had to be postponed till a date when she would be able to attend. Also, Bogdan and his wife, two Polish workers in their late 50ies, used to take every opportunity to visit their families, travelling at least once a month to Poland pre-pandemic. While they were used to visiting their sons and grandchildren as often as they wished, the uncertainty about changing regulations and border rules caused them to forgo several visits. Bogdan's wife: Well, on Whatsapp we could practically [see each other] daily.

Bogdan: But [before the pandemic] we would go very often!

Bogdan's wife: (…) Normally, before, we would even go... every two or three weeks. And once a month for sure.

Bogdan: But we would have surely been more often, if not...

Bogdan's wife: …if not for the pandemic, right.

5.2.2 Changing quarantine measures

One important tool to enable safe free movement during the pandemic, was a frequently updated colour-coded map of countries and regions based on a classification of the epidemiological situation in the country. The map would indicate how safe it was to visit a given place at a given time, and set divergent requirements for both entry and return, depending on the colour of a given place. Rather than facilitating travel, for Alina, the changing colours in Romania and the Netherlands kept her from travelling. She tried to keep herself as much up to date as possible by checking the news on Facebook but would feel overwhelmed with the uncertainty of the situation:

"I can't promise anything. (…) Before, I'd go home every 4 months. (…) Because when the list shows up on Friday, I look: where is the Netherlands? In the red

zone, the yellow zone, the green zone? The list is on my phone (…). It appears on my Facebook and when it shows up, I check. (…) It shows up on Friday and I look."

While the country colour classifications were designed to enable safe free movement during the pandemic, it simultaneously impeded planning cross-border travel because of the uncertainty and ever-changing epidemiological developments in countries. While at one point, Romania was for instance considered green on the colour-coded map, the Netherlands, instead, was a red country, implying severe entry restrictions when Romanian workers wanted to travel back home, with quarantine periods that would leave little or no time for social interactions, the main reason of such a visit. During other periods, measures in both the host and home country would impose a quarantine period twice, leaving many people to decide to postpone travel back home till times would get better. For those workers that were used to being highly mobile and visiting their families and main residencies several times a year, those extra hurdles significantly affected their social life.

For meat worker Emil, Covid restrictions both in the Netherlands as well as Romania kept him from visiting his family, a fact that deeply upset him:

"How can I go home? I'd place my grandchildren in quarantine and my son as well. (…) It's bad. I wish… I miss… It's almost been 3 – 4 months. I miss them. And I told them, 'Son, I can't come home because they will quarantine me'. If I come home, we all stay in one house, somehow. (…) They would quarantine us all. What can we do? (…) This affected me a lot. (…) I can't go to my children when I want to (…) and this is the greatest pain in my heart."

Also for Szymon, a Polish order picker who worked in the Netherlands and lived in Germany, the changing border and quarantine rules of several countries determined his abilities to see his sons who both live in Poland. For Szymon, this was the heaviest blow of the pandemic:

"What hurt me the most was the last year (…) I wasn't in Poland for a whole year. I couldn't leave, while I do have kids there, in Poland. So that was hurtful. (...) There was a period of time where I could have gotten into three quarantines, if I went there and came back. Because there were different regulations in Poland, different ones in Germany, and different again in the Netherlands, at work. (…) I was waiting until things would clarify a bit... and only after one year of time, [I could see them again]."

5.2.3 Covid-tests and -passports

Another tool established to enable cross- border travel were Covid-tests and the negative test result certificates to cross borders. However, these could be rather

expensive, sometimes so expensive, that workers could not afford them. For Milena, a 24 years-old meat worker who used to travel between Poland and the Netherlands every few weeks, the prices for Covid tests hindered her mobility:

> *"I cannot spend 300 zloty [ca. €65] every two or three months. I basically fly all the time. (…) Last year, for Christmas, together with my partner we spent 1,200 zloty [ca. €262]. At that time, a test with English translation would cost 600 zloty. Now the prices are at 200 zloty [ca. €42], but that's still 200 zloty!"*

With the arrival of the vaccines and the EU digital Covid-certificates, cross-border travel became easier, particularly for those workers who were vaccinated. Interestingly, some workers we interviewed indicated that they would only get a vaccination, if that would be a way to regain the opportunity to travel. So instead of a means of protection against the corona virus, some workers perceived the vaccines foremost as instruments to re-open travel opportunities and regain their former mobile lifestyle. For example, order picker Irena explained:

> *"It was important for me to go to Poland without problems. And this was I think the biggest motivation for me to get a vaccine. (…) And so I got a vaccine, so that I could have a Covid-passport. To not be in quarantine nor in Poland, nor upon my return to the Netherlands."*

Mikolaj, a Polish meat worker, had a similar approach, yet felt reluctant to get a vaccine at first:

> *"I would perhaps get a vaccine, but actually only to have it a bit easier. Because if they would finally close these borders, they would give me a warrant for a quarantine. (…) But I would prefer to not get a vaccine. (…) In any case, I think sooner or later everyone will have to get a vaccine, because otherwise you won't be able to get anywhere otherwise."*

That getting a Covid-19 vaccination was used as strategy to uphold mobility, rather than as a means of protection against the virus, only emphasises how the sudden immobility impacted their previously much more mobile lives. While for Alina, Bogdan or Milena it was hard to be unable to visit their families back in Poland as frequently as before, for others, who live in the Netherlands with their partners and children, the travel restrictions were less severely felt as it did not impact their nuclear family life as much. Where the EU and national governments early on in the pandemic stressed the importance of continued free mobility of (especially essential) workers within the EU (Mantu, 2022; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2022), little regard was paid to the pandemic's impact on the cross-border social and family life of the same mobile workers.

Even though mobility formed a vital part of the (social) lives of many EU mobile workers, especially those with transnational (nuclear) families.

5.2.4 Free mobility despite travel restrictions

Although some workers we spoke to felt hindered, or even periodically entirely prevented from crossing borders, others maintained their mobility throughout the pandemic, transcending borders several times without ever getting controlled. Some did not even take COVID-tests before travelling or get a vaccine before travelling across Europe. Many organized such trips themselves and used private cars and crossed borders 'without any problems', as Helena related:

> *"Of course, by car it's not a problem, even if they announce controls on the roads, it is not true. We went once, now in May, when there was still a lockdown – nothing, zero controls (…) We didn't do any tests, nothing. We just drove through, nothing. (…) No tests, no controls, we didn't experience any of it."*

Such experiences made some think that the idea of border closures, travel restrictions, or border controls were a myth, rather than real practice. Workers who did not own a vehicle sought out alternative methods to cross borders. For Bożena, a 31-year-old Polish meat worker, for instance, it was very important to be able to visit her daughter as much as possible. Bożena started to work in the Netherlands together with her partner in autumn 2019, leaving their daughter in the custody of their parents in Poland. As Bożena and her partner did not have a car, she was glad to be able to use an informal network of drivers that offered test-and-vaccination-free rides to Poland online:

> *"In that period in which they closed the borders... some drivers would make money on this. (...) They knew how to drive, where to cross [borders], everything was already organised. (...) Some drivers (...) stopped before the border and people would cross the border as a tour, by foot. And he [driver] would cross with a different car... or the same, with all the luggage of these people. (...) They did this all for us, so that we can see our families, after all. So that we can do that, right?"*

Also, Aurel, a 21-year-old meat worker, travelled to Romania in a small van with other EU mobile workers. He went when the Netherlands was listed as a 'red' country in Romania. In order to avoid quarantine for all passengers travelling to Romania, the bus driver told everyone, in case the police stopped them at the border, to say that they were coming from Germany instead, a 'green' country to Romania at that time.

In contrast to the workers who postponed and cancelled travel during the pandemic, these workers found ways themselves, or via the informal network of EU mobile workers, to maintain their mobility, despite the formal restrictions.

6. Health

In this section we discuss the health impact of the pandemic on EU mobile workers. The experiences with access to health care are discussed elsewhere (see de Lange et al. forthcoming). While COVID as virus is not discriminatory towards migrants, their socio-economic position plays an important role in how the pandemic impacts their health. In this section, we draw attention to (1) the impact of covid-related information on EU mobile workers' health risks and (2) the experience of work trumping health on several occasions in the lived reality of these workers.

6.1 Information on Covid & Covid-related measures

When the pandemic became a reality in the Netherlands, information on how to safeguard one's health and prevent infection became crucial for everyone – thus also for EU mobile workers. In the first weeks, no information was available in other languages than Dutch and English, as a result of which EU mobile workers who did not speak those languages became dependent on unofficial sources of information, such as Facebook groups and portals such as niedziela.nl, as well as friends, colleagues, and employers. However, language was not the only factor that affected a more or less successful information transfer.

A general isolation from the Dutch society through demarcated housing and work circumstances also hampered information access. Especially when both work and housing are organised and regulated by a singular company, workers depended primarily on their employers for information on Covid and Covid-related measures. How well-informed workers were of the covid-situation depended on the quality, accuracy and accessibility of such information provided by their employers. Polish meat workers Mikołaj and Bożena, as well Romanian meat worker Nicoleta, were content with how their temporary work agencies informed them on the covid-related developments during different phases of the pandemic.

Other workers were, however, less satisfied with how their employer communicated certain measures and covid-related safety rules. Especially information regarding payment during quarantine, which procedures to follow in case of a covid-infection or where to turn to for health care in case of severe symptoms, were not known to some workers we interviewed. This left some workers uninformed, or misinformed about covid-measures or procedures to be followed.

Romanian meat worker Elena heard from colleagues that in case she caught Covid-19, she would be brought to an unknown place and be locked up there, for an unknown period of time, possibly without receiving payment and possibly followed by dismissal. Throughout the pandemic, Elena feared catching a covid-infection, not because of the potential health consequences for herself, but because of the potential financial and job consequences an infection might entail for her. When she developed covid-related symptoms, she was so scared of what would happen to her during isolation, that she kept quiet and continued to go to work, instead of calling in sick. She explained:

> *'We were afraid... I wasn't afraid of corona, of that virus, we were afraid that they would round us up and take us somewhere, do us harm (...) You see, we didn't know! Because had I known, I wouldn't have gone to work sick! I would have gone to the doctor as well! But I was scared, and I didn't know if it would be paid. [...] I was afraid, when I saw how once they found those people sick, they took them somewhere else.'*

Elena's story is not exceptional and shows how a lack of proper and reliable information regarding covid-measures and consequences among EU mobile workers can lead to behaviour that heightens health risks at the worksite.

Other workers we interviewed had no problems accessing covid-related information, as they learned how to navigate through Dutch information channels or had a social network with better-informed friends and family members who would help to translate information or provide them with news updates. In order to remain up to date with covid-regulations and developments, Polish distribution worker Adam would ask his Dutch-speaking supervisor for help:

> *"With the information here it was a bit harder, because I am Polish. I don't speak Dutch, so I don't follow Dutch media at all (...) and so I had to choose wisely. (...) My supervisor, the process engineer, was a Turkish guy with whom I had a great vibe. I would speak to him. He would be quite reliable."*

Adam's approach, nevertheless, was exceptional among the EU mobile workers we interviewed. We encountered more workers that were rather uninformed about covid-measures, leading to potentially more risky behaviour from a covid-point of view, than the other way around.

6.2 Work trumps health

Where some workers were hardly worried about covid, or even sceptical of it, as they experienced bigger issues than Covid alone, others had serious concerns about

possibly catching a covid-infection, either because of the health implication or the financial repercussions, as we discussed above.

For workers with financial responsibilities for their families back home or in the Netherlands, with mortgage payments or high rental fees, work – also in times of a pandemic – was and remained a main priority, to such a degree that workers would put work before their own health. At the same time, the workers felt pressure from employers that prioritized the continuance of work over taking measures to protect the health of the people working in their company (whether they are directly employed or contracted workers).

6.2.1 Better to not call in sick

Various workers we interviewed worried about getting sick or about calling in sick to their employer. Such concerns were especially prominent among workers on temporary agency contracts that can be dissolved quickly, and workers on temporary contracts with short durations. Workers feared that calling in sick would be followed-up with dismissal, and for many, a simultaneous loss of housing and health insurance.

Since Magdalena arrived in the Netherlands during the pandemic, her work relations never lasted long and she went through several phase A agency contracts in the first year of her stay in the Netherlands. When she got a muscle inflammation from her repetitive work at a meat conveyor belt, she was fired and forced by the agency to leave the accommodation within a few hours only. Due to her injury, Magdalena was not able to find another job immediately, and spent a few days sleeping in the streets. For some workers, losing their job due to illness, was such a frightening perspective, that they went to work anyway despite covid-infections. Other workers were frequent job hoppers, who found it quite easy to navigate the flexible Dutch labour market. Also during the pandemic, they were able to find a new job within a few hours without any previous qualification. They thus experienced little stress over potential job loss during the pandemic. Polish distribution workers Maja and Jaroslaw, for instance, simply resigned from their jobs and searched for another whenever an agency employer did not act like a ‘good employer’, or a housing situation was below their standards. Maja and Jaroslaw, who we qualified as the ‘escape’ type of worker, both shared a flexible attitude towards their work, were not bound to family responsibilities, and moved to the Netherlands to change their lives without having fixed ideas about where they were working toward. Magdalena’s experience, on the other hand, illustrates a typical vulnerable economically motivated worker’ experience, with dependence on the agency employer.

6.2.2 Pressure to continue work when sick or infected

Where some workers were afraid to call in sick, other workers felt pressured to come into work despite being ill by employers that prioritized the workflow over the health of their workers. When 47-year-old meat production worker Alexandru had Covid symptoms for a fortnight, he called in sick at work, but his line manager refused to accept a sick leave due to staff shortages. Alexandru then self-medicated with medicine he bought at a Polish supermarket and continued to work without getting better. After two weeks, he had trouble breathing and could not work anymore. When he contacted his employer again, he was granted a holiday leave, so he could drive to Romania for medical treatment. Alexandru's story illustrates the lack of access to Dutch health care, as searching for medical treatment in the Netherlands did not even cross his mind. Instead, he took holiday leave, to seek medical treatment in his home country Romania, even during a pandemic with restrictions on travel in place.

In the case of Alexandru, it was not confirmed whether it concerned a covid-infection. Yet, we also learned about cases where workers with a confirmed covid-infection, were pressured by their agency employers to break quarantine or isolation, and return to work early before quarantine or isolation periods were formally ended. Polish meat worker Magdalena was asked by her employer – a temporary work agency – to come to work, although she had been told by the Dutch public health services (*GGD*) that she needed to remain quarantined. The agency asked Magdalena not to tell anything about her illness at the company where she worked.

> *"After 10 days the GGD [Dutch public health services] called and asked how I was and (…) this lady [from the GGD] heard through the phone that I still have a runny nose. 'No, you still can't leave the house'. However, also the agency called me to ask how I was feeling. And I said, well good, I am left with the last bits of the runny nose, I don't have a fever, the cough is gone, but the runny nose... (…) and the next day they called me again and told me that they urgently need people and that if I am feeling fine I can come to work. (…) And so I didn't have to isolate anymore. And I said 'ok, but in two days the GGD (…) will be calling me, so if I will be at work, I need to be able to pick up the phone'. – The agency answered: 'So then you will pick up and say that you are at home'. (…) And so I went to work, right? There were, there in the company (...) of course I was not supposed to tell anyone anything. 'Quiet, quiet, don't say anything. That you had Covid or anything!'."*

We heard similar stories from other EU mobile workers. Adrian, a 53-year-old Romanian distribution worker, for instance, returned to the Netherlands after holidays and knew that he had to quarantine for five days before he could return to work. However, an HR representative from his agency employer, asked him come to work despite the prescribed quarantine period, because they were in dire need of workers at that time.

6.2.3 Testing at work

Especially in the early phases of the covid-pandemic the accessibility of covid-tests, with rapid test results was challenging for (employers of) EU mobile workers. Workers experienced many difficulties when they tried to arrange covid-tests, and later covid-vaccinations, by themselves via the Dutch public health services. These difficulties related to language barriers, a lack of municipal registration of the individual workers, and the lack of online identification log-ins (the so-called Digital Identifier, DigID, which was used in the Netherlands as primary route to make such appointments). While many employers arranged testing facilities at the work-site, testing practices were at times rather arbitrary.

Especially at larger-scale workplaces, and particularly in meat factories after the covid-outbreaks in May and June 2020, on the spot testing stations were created. Here, external medical staff (from Dutch public health services, or private testing companies) performed the covid-tests. Sometimes, direct employees of distribution or meat companies would be trained to be able to perform covid-tests on their colleagues. According to some workers, these test facilities worked well. Kacper, a 42-year-old Polish meat production worker, received a positive Covid-test result in the middle of his shift, where he worked together with many colleagues for several hours in a meat production hall. Kacper's employer asked him to leave work immediately, and he returned to his room in the employer-arranged he stayed. After Kacper got a chance to pack his belongings, his employer sent him to a separate location, organized by the temporary agency employer, where he would stay in isolation for the remainder of his covid-infection.

Other workers reported on less consistent testing practices. Polish meat workers Kinga and Milena mentioned how testing was not always done properly. Sometimes, colleagues would only pretend to perform a covid-test, instead of taking real samples from their nose and throat. Milena mentioned that she could also talk herself out of being tested. Other ways to avoid the covid-tests were skipping the line, or saying that they already had been tested. Kinga explained:

> *"In some periods they were doing even these 3-4 times a week, really! I sometimes refused and would tell them that I have done it already once that week and said that I don't want to do them anymore. So if I had done it once in that week, they didn't make me do the other three times anymore."*

Such outright refusals to participate in the workplace testing practices, we only heard from workers who had built up good relationships at their workplace over time. Workers with only short job tenures at a particular work site, were less forward in (telling us about) avoiding preventive, yet mandatory, employer-arranged covid-tests.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

In this paper, we discussed how EU mobile workers experienced different effects of the Covid-pandemic in the Netherlands. While the pandemic for some individual cases had certain positive effects, such effects were usually linked to personal circumstances, and not specifically related to their overall situation as EU mobile workers. Overall, EU mobile workers so far did not feel any bigger, structural changes that could improve their position as workers in the Netherlands sustainably. It is furthermore particularly striking that none of the workers who participated in this study have experienced any change in the way they are appreciated as group of workers residing in the Netherlands since the pandemic. No one mentioned the heightened media attention for their position as EU mobile workers, nor the political debates about it; let alone shared expectations of potential changes in their circumstances of work or living through policy changes in the near future.

While the pandemic changed the way many people in the Netherlands worked, it hardly affected the everyday working life of EU mobile workers in meat-processing factories and distribution warehouses. Their work continued on-site throughout the pandemic, though it was partly adapted with the implementation of Covid-safety measures. Where the experiences of EU mobile workers are generally discussed as one group, we highlight the differential experiences of workers with different intentions and expectations of work and life in the Netherlands by broadly distinguishing three groups: 1) the more or less 'classic' *economically* motivated worker, who works in the Netherlands to earn (more) money; 2) the *family* worker, who lives and works with partner and children in the Netherlands (or plans to bring them over) and plans for a future in the Netherlands; 3) the worker who has not moved to the Netherlands for work primarily, but rather to *escape* a certain situation in their prior lives, such as a personal loss, divorce, or to pursue new adventures in a career or life change. In short, what we illustrate is that the pandemic and its related measures have been experienced differently depending on EU mobile workers' personal and family situation, their socio-economic backgrounds, and their envisioned future plans.

With the experiences of EU mobile workers in mind, we formulate the following recommendations to improve their position as EU citizens and workers in the Netherlands. While we acknowledge and endorse broader recommendations to strengthen the effectiveness of the labour rights enforcement for this group of workers, as well as efforts to include EU mobile workers on an equal footing in Dutch society, including decent work contracts, possibilities to learn the Dutch language, and giving them a future perspective (Taskforce 'Aanjaagteam Bescherming Arbeidsmigranten', 2020; Algemene Rekenkamer, 2021; Cremers, 2022), we base our recommendations here on the interviews we conducted regarding the workers' experiences during the

pandemic. Though based on their pandemic-experiences, the recommendations reach beyond these, and target a sustainable improvement of their position in the Netherlands, so that they *as workers* become valued for their structural contribution to the Dutch labour market.

7.1 Policy appreciation and acknowledgement of the position of EU-mobile workers, especially in times of crisis

From a policy point of view, the structural, yet specific situation of EU mobile workers within the Dutch labour market should be acknowledged more comprehensively. What the pandemic has shown for sure, is that while these workers fulfill a structural labour market demand in the Netherlands, many are in a dependent and therefore potentially vulnerable position. **In order to make sure that government communication – in general, and in times of crisis, regarding crisis-related measures – reaches this group of workers, information needs to be accessible in the languages the workers speak, in understandable terms (for instance, by using visualizations), and tailored to their specific situation**. As the policy definition of a 'household', that was the premise of many Covid-safety measures, did not match the household situation of many EU mobile workers, it became difficult, if not impossible, to follow-up such measures. Even EU mobile workers who have lived in the Netherlands for multiple years experienced difficulties to access basic health provisions in the Netherlands, for which the government should take measures to improve the accessibility of the Dutch health care system for non-Dutch citizens. No health care provider should be able to refuse care to EU mobile citizens because of unclarities regarding the reimbursement of health costs.

More attention should be paid to the social and family life of mobile EU citizens, also during a crisis. While government and EU communications, early on in the covid-pandemic, pleaded for the continued mobility of essential workers across EU member states, little to no regard was paid to the implications for these workers' social and especially family life. Particularly for workers with a nuclear family spread across EU member states, the pandemic's mobility impact had harsh repercussions. **Emergency arrangements accessible to 'essential' workers during a crisis, should also be available to workers who *de facto* are in a similar situation because work continues on-site, and not remotely**. This would ensure that also EU mobile workers can for instance use emergency childcare provisions when they are not in a position to accommodate sudden school closures and have to go to work to keep a basic level of

income.[7] Similarly, access to emergency health facilities, such as covid-tests and vaccinations, should be accessible to EU mobile workers from the beginning.

The government should pro-actively pay attention to the specific position of EU mobile workers in the Netherlands and take actions to ensure that emergency measures do not have detrimental repercussions for this specific group of workers. Certain covid-measures, such as quarantine periods, came with a financial risk for many EU mobile workers employed on temporary agency contracts, when continued payment during quarantine was not guaranteed for all workers. Also, the already known reluctance among EU mobile workers to call in sick, because of the individual financial implications for agency workers, remained during the pandemic, fueling covid-transmission risks at the work floor. The Dutch government should have taken measures to prevent that EU mobile workers would be forced to leave their employer-arranged accommodation on short notice during the pandemic, when their employment contracts were dissolved. Inspiration could have been drawn from the US, where a temporary ban on home evictions was in place during the pandemic.[8] The policy plans towards the decoupling of employment and housing contracts are steps in the right direction, though did not prevent EU mobile workers finding themselves without a roof over their head during the pandemic.

7.2 Strengthen employers' duty of care

The dependency of many EU mobile workers on their employers is problematically high. Employers arrange jobs, housing, and transportation for many and are on top of that an important source for information and support. Yet, while all employers made arrangements to implement covid-safety measures, workers felt that in the face of high production norms, such precautionary health-measures were deemed less important. When it comes to balancing workers' right to a safe and healthy work environment with economic production demands, the workers' testimonies in our study indicate that economic concerns regularly trump workers' health. **Employers' duty of care should thus be strengthened to protect EU mobile workers rights more effectively**.

The employers' duty of care could be extended to also include (making provisions to ensure) proper access to health care and information, in line with the ILO indicators of decent work. Many workers we interviewed rely to an important extent on their employers for information on government- and covid-measures, and access to health

7 Many EU mobile workers have a limited family and social network in the Netherlands that they could potentially mobilise to take care of their children while they are at work.

8 Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions To Prevent the Further Spread of COVID-19. A Notice by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on 09/04/2020, federalregister.gov.

care (because of unfamiliarity with the Dutch health care system, or language barriers). The quality of information and support (for instance when workers needed to quarantine or isolate) provided by employers in practice, varies greatly, to the possible detriment of dependent EU mobile workers.

Employers of EU mobile workers should pay more attention to workers' family and personal life. None of the workers we interviewed experienced any support from their employers regarding their personal or family life during the pandemic, leaving the workers to solve family care arrangements themselves.

In line with the recommendations above, more provisions should be included in collective bargaining agreements to accommodate to the specific situation of EU mobile workers. The provision in the 2021 CBA for the temporary agency branch that states that agencies need to consider workers' personal circumstances with the collection of rent, especially when a worker is unable to pay the rent for reasons beyond personal control or illness, illustrates the potential role of CBAs in improving the conditions of work and housing of EU mobile workers.

7.3 Enhance EU mobile workers' voice and support

Striking elements in the worker interviews were the isolation, the lack of support and the total neglect of their voice regarding the working conditions they experience in the Netherlands. Part of an appreciation of EU mobile workers as workers is to treat them as regular employees within the work process, including consulting them regarding their conditions at work, especially also during a crisis. Furthermore, **employers should encourage EU mobile workers to provide their perspective and input on (improving) their work conditions**, and if they arrange housing and transport, extend this endeavor into those areas as well, in order to work towards full appreciation of them as workers, even when they are contracted via temporary agency employment.

To fight the isolation and potential vulnerability of EU mobile workers, access to support structures and initiatives should be improved, also within the workplace. Allowing trade union access to the workplace, to inform and support worker rights would be a good step in that direction. Workers now depend on support provided by NGO's or trade unions outside the workplace, and their reach is not all-encompassing. Many workers we interviewed hardly knew about initiatives they could contact in case they needed support. Some workers also pointed towards the lack of support from within the EU mobile workers group themselves, in which the lack of trust and sometimes inter-ethnic animosity seem to play a role. Concerted efforts, by NGO's and trade unions, to build up communities of support of EU mobile workers themselves, might be a fruitful way to reduce the dependency and isolation of this group of workers in the Netherlands.

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Appendix Overview background characteristics interviewees

Table 1 Overview interviewees

Interviewee	*Nationality*	*Gen-der*	*Age*	*In NL since*	*category*
Adrian	Romanian	M	53	2016	economic
Ioana	Romanian	F	34	2021	economic
Dragos	Romanian	M	21	2019	escape
Nicolae	Romanian	M	30	2020	escape
Alexandru	Romanian	M	47	2018	economic
Aurel	Romanian	M	21	2019	economic
Lucian	Romanian	M	21	2021	escape
Alina	Romanian	F	49	2018	economic
Nicoleta	Romanian	F	39	2018	family
Carol	Romanian	M	30	2020	family
Elena	Romanian	F	34	2017	family
Sergiu	Romanian	M	28	2020	economic
Paula	Romanian	F	30	2021	economic
Emil	Romanian	M	38	2021	economic
Florin	Romanian	M	32	2021	economic
Helena	Polish	F	28	2019	family
Irena	Polish	F	56	2019	escape
Kacper	Polish	M	42	2019	economic

Mikolaj	Polish	M	23	2020	economic
Zygmunt	Polish	M	50	2020	economic
Bogdan	Polish	M	59	2004	family
Jagoda	Polish	F	23	2020	economic
Adam	Polish	M	28	2018	escape
Jaroslaw	Polish	M	42	2016	escape
Zofia	Polish	F	62	2007	economic
Szymon	Polish	M	49	2018	escape
Maja	Polish	F	26	2017	escape
Bartek	Polish	M	28	2011	family
Bozena	Polish	F	31	2019	family
Czeslaw	Polish	M	62	2020	economic
Magdalena	Polish	F	35	2021	economic
Anna	Polish	F	27	2017	family
Filip	Polish	M	28	2021	family
Milena	Polish	F	24	2018	family
Kinga	Polish	F	34	2007	family