Corvinus University of Budapest

Navigating the Divide

The Impact of Hungary's 2024-2025 Immigration Law on Semi-skilled Third-Country Migrants employed in the Service Sector

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1. Introduction

As announced in the National Register of Laws, "Hungary belongs to Hungarians and Hungarian jobs primarily also belong to Hungarians. We need clear rules on who can stay in Hungary and for how long. Neither work nor other residence should be unlimited and cannot be automatically extended. (…) Hungary is a sovereign state - it is up to Hungary to decide who it allows into its territory, and we expect everyone to abide by Hungarian laws and Hungarian standards of coexistence. Anyone who does not respect Hungarian laws and rules must leave Hungary immediately. (…) By tightening up the rules on working in Hungary, we are creating another legal safeguard to protect Hungary from mass immigration. A foreigner can only work in Hungary if no Hungarian worker is engaged to do so."[1]

This policy statement not only reflects a broader narrative of national sovereignty and economic protectionism but also underscores the importance of defining who is entitled to participate in the labor market and society at large. The way such policies are communicated acts as a guiding framework that shapes public perceptions of migrants and influences integration and labour market outcomes. Such policy framing significantly influences both public perception and the lived realities of third-country migrants.

The thesis aspires to explore the trajectory and characteristics of employment in Hungary with reference to legal status and its effect on migrant lifepaths. To clarify, the target population under investigation consists of semi-skilled migrant workers from third countries active in service sector employment on which residence permit validity is reliant on. Accordingly, the objective of the project is to provide insight into how the recent shift in the immigration framework started by the 35/2024. (II. 29.) government decree affects the livelihoods, plans, evaluations, and so overall lifepaths of third-country migrants employed in the service sector. The law's recency and impact make it a key feature of this project.

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[1] "Magyarország a magyaroké és a magyar munkahelyek is első helyen a magyarokat illetik meg. Világosan kell szabályoznunk, ki és mennyi ideig tartózkodhat Magyarország területén. Sem a munkavégzés, sem más tartózkodás nem lehet korlátlan és nem hosszabbítható meg automatikusan. (...) Magyarország szuverén állam – maga határozza meg, hogy kit enged a területére, és mindenkitől elvárjuk, hogy a magyar törvényeket és az együttélés magyar normáit tartsa be. Aki a magyar törvényeket és a magyar szabályokat nem tiszteli, annak azonnal el kell hagynia Magyarország területét. (...) A magyarországi munkavállalás szigorításával újabb jogi védelmet alkotunk azért, hogy Magyarországot megvédjük a tömeges bevándorlástól. Külföldi csak akkor végezhet Magyarországon munkát, ha annak elvégzésére magyar munkavállaló nem vállalkozik.'(Nemzeti Jogszabálytár, 2023)

The main research motivation is fueled by my firsthand experiences with former international colleagues and their insights as well as observed struggles. The initial observed phenomena that piqued my interest and drew my attention to the changing legal framework was the sudden disappearance of several distant colleagues due to the sudden discontinuation of their work permits inexplicably happening at the time the new law was announced. Because of this, I decided to escalate my involvement from listening in on conversations taking place in the office kitchen to conducting interviews with affected third-country workers. In short, the reach of the change in the legal context is to be assessed with respect to the effect on immigrant lifepaths and the interacting factors of their perspectives.

After being aware of the broader research, focus can be shifted to the particular research questions the project is determined to study. The primary research question is expressed as ‘How are the lifepaths of semi-skilled third-country migrants employed in the service sector affected by the new immigration law of Hungary?’. Although the question is a natural inference following the general train of thought and research interest introduced until now, further elaboration has to be made on the areas or domains the question is targeted at.

The research aims to survey the conditions and characteristics of staying in Hungary that concerns the target population. This aspect consists of general grounding variables ranging from length of stay and arrival to Hungary to perceived change in future plans and livelihoods caused by the 2024 immigration law. This introductory section is expected to follow along the lines of vital milestones migrants have overcome or are looking forward to in their lifepaths. One closely connected point is the inspection of existential stability in migrant livelihoods, both on the material and emotional side.

Further elaboration surfaces the need to address the subquestion, 'What role does labour market position play in shaping these changes?'. Relying on this question, it is necessary to delve deeper into the intricate relationship between labour market position and migration paths. The phenomena of deskilling and labour market dualism can be understood as being pivotal in influencing migrant lifepaths in terms of stability once again from both a material and emotional perspective, along with hierarchical standing within the labour market or within the host society. It is important to note that all mentioned aspects of the research questions are intertwined with the dominant research goal and have differing significance and outcomes based on the given individual under study. Consequently, analysis focused on the different materializations is called for.

The recent immigration law in Hungary, which imposes strict restrictions on third-country workers, carries significant social relevance that extends beyond mere policy changes. One key concern is the potential transformation of Hungary's population landscape and labor market, which makes understanding these developments vital. At the same time, the human dimension of these policies cannot be overlooked. By highlighting the lived experiences of affected workers, this thesis aims to show how restrictive frameworks can marginalize individuals who are not only willing but well-positioned to contribute meaningfully to Hungary's economy and society. This oversight risks filtering out talented individuals who have a genuine connection to Hungary and aspirations to establish roots, start families, and integrate into the culture. By limiting access to the labor market, Hungary may inadvertently hinder economic growth and innovation that arise from a diverse workforce. Addressing labor shortages and fostering economic vitality are crucial, and policymakers must recognize the valuable role that migrants can play (OECD, 2024).

Understanding the communication surrounding these policies and their influence on public perception is essential (Sides & Citrin, 2007). By the nature of the thesis fostering dialogue and awareness, gaps between policymakers and migrants could be bridged, leading to a more inclusive approach to immigration that acknowledges the complex realities faced by those affected. This thesis also fills a gap in the literature by focusing on semi-skilled workers, often overlooked between the low-high-skilled dichotomy. Finally, the thesis attempts to construct an approach dedicated to analyzing the presence of a hierarchically lower standing or simply the segmented position of third-country migrants within the labour market.

This thesis remains within the legal and institutional context of Hungary and focuses exclusively on the 2024-2025 immigration reforms. While insights may be relevant to broader semi-peripheral migration contexts, no cross-national comparison is conducted. The topic of integration policies is only touched upon to the extent that it is crucial for contextualizing labour market access and legal constraints, as the primary analytical focus stays on employment trajectories and the implications of legal categorization. As a qualitative study, this research is not intended to provide a comprehensive statistical overview, particularly as quantitative data on the new law's effects remains largely unavailable at this stage.

2. Literature review

This section will review the main bodies of relevant literature while introducing key theoretical concepts essential for understanding the research questions. World-systems theory and dual labor market theory are employed, based on the assumption that immigration is a natural consequence of economic globalization and market penetration that transcends national boundaries (Massey et al., 1993). World-systems theory is particularly significant as it situates Hungary within the framework of global capitalism, besides proving as a fragment of the explanation behind the multitude of migratory forces. This perspective offers valuable context for understanding Hungary's migratory patterns in relation to global trends and proves as a skeleton for the thesis.

On the other hand, dual labor market theory becomes increasingly relevant when examining the experiences and conditions of third-country migrants. This theory emphasizes the divide between primary and secondary labor markets, shedding light on some of the most prominent variables under analysis, such as labour market differences in positions of natives and immigrants followed by indicators of vulnerability. The emergence of a secondary labor market has direct implications for the existential security and support systems available to these individuals, as well as their overall labor market standing and mobility.

By integrating these theories, the section will explore the interconnectedness of global economic dynamics and local labor market conditions, ultimately providing a comprehensive understanding of third-country individuals within the broader context of migration and labor in Hungary.

2.1 Hungary’s position within global capitalism: a World-systems Theory perspective

The review of Massey et al. (1993) on migration theories most frequently being applied in the international academic context provides an essential outlook on the enactment of world-systems and dual labour market theory. In elementary terms, world-systems theory holds the assumption that migration is a natural consequence of economic globalization, as indicated by market penetration across borders.

Correspondingly, the theory also argues that international migration follows the political and economic organization of an expanding global economy, which closely relates to the idea of labour migration with reference to this global market penetration reaching periphery areas and being the

drive of cross-border mobility (Massey et al., 1993). In addition, the application of world-systems theory within the framework of labour migration, supplies a more nuanced and systematic approach than traditional push-pull factors (Beaverstock, 1994). The catalyst of international mobility is not only displayed in economic motivations of migration demonstrated by international flows of labor following international flows of capital and the internationalization itself giving way to the diversification of products and services but the very nature, momentum, and development of migration within Europe being rooted in labour migratory forces (Beaverstock, 1994; Massey et al., 1993; Menz & Caviedes, 2010).

By characterizing Hungary as a distinct semi-periphery country, it is evident that its migration patterns are shaped by a systematic regional economic inequality that endures across different regimes. Hungary's unique situation is marked by a pronounced dependency on Western nations, coupled with restrictive policies on immigration from third countries. This limitation significantly impacts Hungary's ability to address brain drain, which is vital for its long-term vitality and growth (Melegh & Sárosi, 2015). The forthcoming legal framework of immigration is built on the 2013 Migration Strategy, which states the need for inward labour migration to cater to the needs of the Hungarian labour market and the economy (Kovács et al., 2020; Melegh, 2016). Hungary receives "such migrants with such characteristics …who (in a fictitious migratory 'exchange' within global capitalism) could 'compensate' for the lost population" to the West by the phenomenon of brain drain and attempt to balance out this global unequal exchange (Melegh, 2016, p92; Melegh & Sárosi, 2015). The analysis of the novel immigration law is also going to refer to the migrant characteristics the Hungarian legal framework targets for selection. The extent of this unequal exchange in the context of Eastern Europe is also portrayed in more contributions to other countries' welfare systems via emigration while collecting tax revenues and having gains below the average level of redistribution from immigrants (Melegh, 2023).

2.2 Labour Market Stratification and the Positioning of Third-Country Nationals in Hungary

Revisiting the theoretical viewpoint, this segment constructs the bridge between dual labour market theory and the familiar notions of labour migration. Despite the criticism addressed at the developments and transitions referencing dual labour market theory, the main constituents of this approach to unequal positionality expand the prior points on World-systems Theory. Dual labour market theory presumes the division of the labour market into a primary and a secondary sector

based on which individuals can decide whether one's job characteristics lean more into one of the categories (Hudson, 2007). The primary sector offers stability and benefits; the secondary, where migrants are concentrated, is marked by low pay, instability, lacking benefits, poor working conditions, high labor turnover, improbable advancement, and often arbitrary and capricious supervision (Hudson, 2007; Massey et al., 1993). The power dynamics beyond can be explained by the different varieties of capitalism conditioning employers into the worker example they would be willing to hire (Menz & Caviedes, 2010).

Before the thesis goes into the specifications and conditions of third-country nationals in the labour market, the structural forces in action must be introduced as proper contextualization. As introduced by Smith (2005), service sector employment follows an increasing tendency mainly in European countries; even so, this increase is also present in the sector-specific considerations of labour market policies (Menz & Caviedes, 2010). Case in point, the FEOR coded fields of 4. Office and management (customer services) occupations, 5. Commercial and services occupations, and 25. Business-type professionals are to be analyzed (KSH, 2008). Another current pattern intensifying with the development of a service economy that can be observed is the high proportion of service jobs indicating non-standard forms of work, which can be understood as part-time or short/fixed-term employment, among others (Hudson, 2007; Smith, 2005). In connection with the global exchange of labour, Smith, (2005) also mentions an example of outsourcing being a key player in the role of Hungary in supplementing workers to the more developed core countries (Melegh, 2016). Contrary to the findings of Kováts & Soltész (2022) on refugees and asylum-seekers not being prone to work in shared service centers and hospitality, almost one-third of foreign workers are situated in these occupations in Hungary. After exhibiting the main contextual and structural factors of immigrant employment, the paper dives into the labour market situation of third-country nationals.

Shifting perspective from the macro level of migration, the labour market position of third-country nationals within the Hungarian workforce also has to be raised. On the general narrative of Hungary as a host country, Melegh (2016) refers to the selective preferential policies in place, namely "For the last two decades Hungary has followed a rather hard and nonsupportive policy toward Third-country Nationals," which can be interpreted as selective migrant regime restricting access to the labour market (Melegh, 2016; Sandoz, 2020). As indicated by (Lippens et al.(2022), preferential policies operating in hiring processes tend to select employees with favorable traits on

the given spectrum, perpetuating tensions between immigrants and natives. In the context of Hungary, Melegh (2016) details the occurrence of demographic nationalism in its migration regime as a central point and essential fragment of an explanation of the foreigner-native distinction (Melegh, 2016). As a casual factor, third-country migrants who do not become naturalized tend to face more discriminatory practices while being more prone to deskilling and employment in lower-skilled jobs (Melegh & Sárosi, 2015, p243). As noted by Borjas(2014), the process of deskilling often results from discriminatory hiring practices and a lack of institutional support for recognizing foreign qualifications. This has been highlighted by Stalker (1994), who argues that deskilling leads not only to a loss of individual potential to the host country but also negatively impacts the labor market as a whole, contributing to economic inefficiency. The absence of skillset recognition not only poses an issue within hiring processes but within employment stability of migrant workers due to being "last in first out" in acting as a buffer stock of reserve labour (Stalker, 1994). The occurrence of deskilling and the overall secondary labour market status of migrants manifests itself as a disadvantage for the Hungarian economy due to the wasteful, diluted use of the available compensatory workforce (Kováts & Soltész, 2022; Melegh, 2016; Melegh & Sárosi, 2015; Stalker, 1994). Furthermore, Kováts and Soltész (2022) assert that the deskilling of migrants diminishes their integration prospects, creating a cycle of disadvantage that is difficult to break. This situation reinforces the notion of migrants as a "backup reserve of labor," where their potential remains untapped, harming both individual employees and the broader economy (Melegh & Sárosi, 2015; Stalker, 1994).

Circling back to the inclination of foreign workers in Hungary toward service sector employment and the susceptibility to being stuck in these volatile secondary environments can be traced back to labour market access restrictions and regulations influenced by limitations of mobility across occupational sectors (Guzi et al., 2023; Melegh & Sárosi, 2015; Smith, 2005). (Guzi et al., 2023)(2023) present the general framework of integration policies that can influence life paths in a powerful way, as well as some commonly used variables measuring social security and access to rights, indicating unequal treatment between natives and immigrants. These aspects resonate with the discovered entry points of Kováts & Soltész (2022), including obtaining permits, entry into the labour market and integration policies themselves. In parallel, the concept of migrant channels provides insight into how immigrants navigate the institutional sphere while maintaining agency and captures the kinds of resources and support that they may have access to depending on

their migration situation. Migration channels can have functions that surpass mobility opportunities, as well as constraints on livelihood that are strongly interconnected with existential security. Contrary to the entry point approach, the thesis presents more of a continuous idea of migrant lifepaths in the form of a consulted analysis supplemented by real experiences of hierarchically lower-standing third-country migrants (Pajnik, 2012).

In greater detail, the level of stability migrants undergo can be understood as the concept of existential security, with possible indicators of income level, number of breadwinners, language skills, network, and nature of educational attainment (Kováts & Soltész, 2022). It is to be highlighted that the recent immigration law hampers the possibility of family reunification for residence permit for employment purposes holders, linking legal aspects to family and existential security (*35/2024. (II. 29.) Korm. Rendelet - Nemzeti Jogszabálytár*, 2024; Kováts & Soltész, 2022). Generally, when it comes to hiring processes, the difference between degrees obtained in the Hungarian higher educational system and those with alien ones gains relevance. This observation can be associated with the aforementioned selective preferential processes also applicable in the contrast of the general employment-tied residence permit versus the Hungarian Card, as well as hiring processes in terms of favoring those with Hungarian accreditations, linkages (Lippens et al., 2022; Melegh, 2016; Sarkadi, 2024). These inclinations, though important, will not appear as a central theme of the thesis due to all respondents attending Hungarian higher education at some point in their journey. When referring to networks, access and knowledge of both the legal processes, decisions between applicable options, and ease of labour market entry play a significant role; however, are especially vital in the lifepaths of third-country migrants who have a tendency to be spatially and occupationally segregated from their Hungarian counterparts, lacking constructive interaction based on the contact hypothesis indicated by Kováts & Soltész (2022).

3. Legal context, definitions concerning third-country migrants

Third-country nationals are defined as “any person who is not a citizen of the European Union … and who is not a person enjoying the European Union right to free movement” (European Commission, 2023). Despite the extensive research focus on asylum-seekers and their difficulties of integration and reaching stability, the neutral standpoint of Hungary as a host country towards third-country migrants is also to be reevaluated on account of the 35/2024. (II. 29.) government decree (Kováts & Soltész, 2022). In the last few decades, the traits of the immigrant population

have varied greatly, however the notable increase (50% from 2017 to 2018) in the number of work permits for third-country foreign workers in Hungary offers substance for the relevant and detailed analysis of third-country migrant lifepaths (Kovács et al., 2020). The 2024 immigration law (*35/2024. (II. 29))* in Hungary signifies a transformation in the legal landscape governing third-country individuals, particularly in relation to employment. While the expansion of residence permits from 18 to 24 types, with eight specifically designated for employment signals extended opportunities, this new legislation introduces rigorous requirements. The residence permit for other purposes, which was a rather flexible category, has been abolished (European Commission, 2024). This shift in the framework reflects a move towards a more organized and restrictive immigration policy (Fragomen, 2024). The Hungarian immigration law introduces new categorizations when applying for "a combined work and residence permit allowing a third-country national to enter into a contract for employment with an employer and to reside legally in the territory of Hungary for the purpose of work" (Kovács et al., 2020, p. 8). This includes the transformation of the previous permit for employment (munkavállalási célú tartókodási engedély) to be surpassed by the residence permit for employment purposes (foglalkoztatási célú tartózkodási engedély) referring to any other job type that is not done in a specific project, for a special employer, for a fixed time period and that does not require special skills or qualifications (non-guest workers or self-employed).

"One of the biggest changes is that the new law introduces separate categories of work permits"- and distinguishes between highly skilled and low-skilled workers" through the introduction of the Hungarian Card and the EU Blue Card as well as introducing a new permit for investors (European Commission, 2024). Employment is available to a highly qualified individual or someone with expertise in a field of particular importance to the country (Fragomen, 2024; Sarkadi, 2024a). More specifically, the Hungarian Card is aimed explicitly at high-skilled workers in sectors deemed necessary by the Hungarian minister responsible for higher education (Nemzeti Jogszabálytár, 2024). As of 2025, these sectors include the FEOR codes of 1. Managers and 2. Professionals (Settlers Relocation, 2024)). Eligible individuals can obtain this Card for a duration of three years with an extra extension of three years, facilitating a long-term period of work and residence in Hungary and thereby attracting talent in crucial areas such as IT, engineering, natural sciences, performative arts and film, as well as professional athletes or coaches (Nemzeti Jogszabálytár, 2024). Conversely, the EU Blue Card functions as a work and residence permit for

highly skilled non-EU nationals, allowing them to work in various EU member states. Holders of the EU Blue Card are granted a total stay of up to eight years (4+4), contingent upon meeting a minimum net salary of 883,671 and employment in line with relevant educational qualifications and professional experience. Requirements include "a preliminary agreement or a valid contract of employment for the establishment of a legal relationship for fixed-term employment of at least 6 months, concluded for the purpose of undertaking employment requiring a high level of education" (*EU Blue Card*, 2025). In light of the Hungarian Card having criteria of an obtained university degree as well as employment in line with the attained educational level, the research sample could also face difficulties in labour market settling (*35/2024. (II. 29.) Korm. Rendelet - Nemzeti Jogszabálytár*, 2024). As an additional restriction, FEOR codes in demand include mostly medical professionals and information technology experts.[2]

The final option of long-term stay in Hungary relevant to the thesis is being a worker on an international assignment, so being relocated to Hungary while staying employed at the original host company in a minimum equally skilled position. Additionally, the law imposes caps on the extensions of residence permits and orders that employees leave Hungary within six days of potential job termination. A major change has also been implemented with relevance to permanent residency. With the new regulations taking effect, those who apply for permanent residency are required to pass a cultural exam in Hungarian. The introduction of a cultural exam was previously only required in cases of citizenship applications, consequently raising the standard for those seeking permanent residency could further accentuate a commitment to social integration within Hungarian society (*35/2024. (II. 29.) Korm. Rendelet - Nemzeti Jogszabálytár*, 2024).

Furthermore, with respect to the 2025 additions (450/2024 (XII. 23.), several supplementary restrictions came into effect influencing third-country migrants. The number of guest worker residence permits and residence permits for employment purposes issued in Hungary may not exceed the number of permits determined annually by the minister responsible for employment policy (*35/2024. (II. 29.) Korm. Rendelet - Nemzeti Jogszabálytár*, 2024). Neither the concrete quota nor the selection process has been voiced officially. Those who applied for the past categories

[2] For a detailed list of the relevant professional classifications associated with EU Blue Card eligibility, see Point 5 of the official criteria: National Directorate-General for Aliens Policing (2025). EU Blue Card. Retrieved March 1, 2025, from https://oif.gov.hu/factsheets/eu-blue-card

can still apply for their extensions; however, they can only start a new visa procedure for the EU Blue Card or Hungarian Card. To clarify, the previously existing option of a residence permit for employment purposes that most interview participants belong to is no longer obtainable.

The 2025 law also reduces the tax reduction options of all non-EEA citizens employed in Hungary (except for Ukrainians and Serbians), namely for Tax benefit of those under twenty-five not having to pay personal income tax, tax benefit for the recently married, and family tax benefit (Sarkadi, 2024). Additionally, several cuts have been made regarding family reunification. Holders of residence permits for employment purposes and student residents no longer retain the right to family reunification, however EU Blue Card and Hungarian Card holders remain eligible ("Family Unification in Hungary," 2024).

Overall, these changes reflect a significant recalibration of Hungary's immigration policy, balancing the demand for foreign labor with national interests and adapting to an evolving political landscape. With relation to the thesis topic, the distinction and total separation between low and high-skilled immigrants combined with the dependency of residence permits on employment poses an especially pressing issue for the target population of semi-skilled immigrants in choosing future paths. Further developments of the project are also going to address the potential difficulties of labour market standing and how the respondents evaluate and navigate the legal maze of EU Blue card eligibility combined with a disappearing legal status.

4. Methodological considerations

The thesis aims to discover and analyse how the new immigration law of Hungary shapes migrant lifepaths, trajectories. In accentuation, the fields of interest pinpointed by the research questions include factors practical to analyse and gather in a qualitative way as the project includes data on perceptions, expectations, personal experiences as well as emotional drive of these. For this reason, I opted for qualitative analysis in the form of a semi-structured interview that allows flexibility and adaptation to the interviewees.

For recruitment strategy, I used snowball sampling launched by contacting several prior colleagues and acquaintances from my professional network via LinkedIn. This resulted in varying levels of proximity with the different interviewees, yet the depth of topics touched upon remained

more or less constant. Consequently, I managed to collect a rich reserve of data from interviewees ranging from work friends to newly acquainted strangers.

At last, I conducted a total of eight semi-structured interviews ranging from 35 to 80 minutes. Seven of these interviews took place in a face-to-face setting, whereas the one outlier was an online meeting conducted via Zoom. The interview population shows varying characteristics in terms of gender, nationality, and legal and relationship status, as displayed in the table below.

Name	Isabella	Amir	Karim	Henri-Armand	Lim	Yassin	Beatriz	Nicolás
Age	20	22	24	27	26	23	28	28
Family status	In a relationship	In a relationship	In a relationship	single	single	single	In a relationship	single
Nationality	Colombia	Egypt	British-Pakistani	Rwanda	Cambodia	Algeria	Brazil	Costa Rica
Legal status	study	Residence Permit for Employment Purposes	Permanent residence	study	Residence Permit for Employment Purposes	Residence Permit for Employment Purposes	Residence Permit for Employment Purposes	Residence Permit for Employment Purposes
Education	Soon BA	BA	BA	MSc	MA	MA	MA	MA
Major	International relations	Business administration and management	Communication and Media Science	Electrical engineering	Political Science	Business administration-tourism management	Psychology	Business administration
Acquired in Hungary	In progress	BA	BA	MSc	MA	MA	MA	MA
Language	Native English, Spanish	Native Egyptian, Arabic, English, A1 Hungarian	Native Urdu, English, A2 Spanish	Native Kinyarwanda, C1 English, French	Native Khmer, C1 English	Native Arabic, French, C1 English, B2 Spanish	Native Portugese, C1 English	Native Portuguese, C1 English, Spanish
Occupational background	Customer Service	Customer Service, Marketing, Finance	Customer Service, Management	Electrical Engineering, Teaching	Teaching, customer service	Customer Service, hospitality, sales	Psychologist, IT support	Financial analyst

Table 1: Overview of Participant Profiles by Legal Category and Job Type

As legal status remains one of the building blocks of the analysis, I have to refer back to majority of the respondents being residence permit for employment purposes holders and also address the exceptions. The special case of Karim as a permanent residency holder belongs to this issue. Karim can be regarded as a "lucky" migrant if we choose to live with his wording as he arrived in Hungary before Brexit, allowing him to be granted the permanent residency owing to his British passport. He was included for comparative purposes to reflect a broader spectrum of legal statuses contrasting those with a residence permit for employment purposes. I also decided to keep his insights in the analysis due to his comprehensive presentation of working in customer service. Karim resembles all other interviewees with respect to currently not being eligible for an EU Blue Card or Hungarian Card. Additionally, the inclusion of those with student status was inspired by reoccurring topics about the study period of interviewees with work permits. In short, students who worked during their study period were included to complement the previously collected data and allow the presentation of a fuller picture of the surroundings of third-country nationals.

So far the thesis has touched upon the participants being third-country migrants employed in the service sector. This constriction is elaborated upon by stating that service-sector positions are understood as employment in hospitality, retail, business, and computer skills-oriented positions, specifically the FEOR coded fields of 4. office and management (customer services) occupations, 5. commercial and services occupations, and 32. (KSH, 2008). The scope of the analysis is narrowed down to these work environments, where migrants are often positioned owing to a boost in language skills or low coverage by the native population. Harmoniously, the mentioned occupational categorisations also resonate well with the semi-skilled understanding of the interviewees, with these jobs often being entry-level but still requiring some corporate affinity or mental work contrasted by solely physical jobs. Despite the elevated nature of service occupations, it does not match the level of being certified as professional employment. Additionally, the common ground for all interviewees lies in their highest educational attainment having been completed in Hungary. This aspect aims to control for observed differences in country of origin connected to the degrees.

Regarding the approach of analysis, I decided to opt for a thematic analysis conducted via Nvivo 14 software, matching the qualitative method. From an analytical perspective, open coding was applied in the thematic analysis of the project.

Turning to ethical considerations, it can be said that all research participants gave their informed consent to participation, use of quotes and liberty of being voice-recorded in either signed or verbal form (for the one online interview). The ethical considerations addressed throughout the data collection process underscore the importance of maintaining participant anonymity and fostering a supportive environment for open dialogue. All participants have been familiarized with the aim and topic of the interviews. Owing to the sensitivity of the included topics extra attention has been given to emphasis on the right to stop the interview at any point or skip answering a question.

Due to some interview participants having shared the same workplace as the researcher extra attention has to be given to keeping anonymity. For these reasons, supplemented by the data protection policy of the company, it is not to be named during the analysis. Several interviewees and I shared employment experiences in a multicultural, outsourced service environment. From a hierarchical perspective, all concerned individuals held the same position as me, consequently no abuse of power plays into the validity of the collected data. Rather, the prior bonding experience of the shared workplace allowed a safer, more comfortable environment and in-depth expression of feelings and challenging life situations. In connection, the power imbalance of the respondents being foreigners and me being native has to be addressed. I did not detect a negative feeling towards me as a researcher; interviewees were increasingly eager to share their struggles and experiences with an "outsider" like me. This could be explained by the invitation for participation already conveying curiosity and positionality of an "ally" in conducting the research.

While the findings provide rich insight into the experiences of third-country nationals within the Hungarian labour market, they are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Instead, the goal is to highlight patterns and structural dynamics that emerge across individual narratives.

The above-detailed methodological choices are true to the research focus on understanding the complexities of working in Hungary's service sector, particularly for those facing deskilling and systemic barriers. In this regard, the insights gained will significantly contribute to the forthcoming analysis, illuminating the multifaceted impact of immigration legislation on the lives of migrants in Hungary.

5. Findings

As introduced by the preceding sections, the main research findings follow three main themes instated by the research questions. The primary direction of the leading research findings is centered around answering the main research question of 'How are the lifepaths of semi-skilled third-country migrants employed in the service sector affected by the new immigration law of Hungary?' 'What role do these changes play in shaping labour market position? By this, I reflect on how the collection of immigration laws affects the livelihoods of third-country migrants, and I supplement the observations with the personal recollections of interviewees concerning decisive moments in their future plans and lifepaths. Afterward, the thesis shifts focus toward the divide between skilled and unskilled workers along the themes of the legal divide, hiring differences, working conditions, support, and future prospects.

5.1 Effects of immigration law changes on employment and residency pathways of third-country nationals in Hungary

5.1.1 Reshaped Futures: Migration Intentions and Legal Constraints

Progressing on the established changes in the legal sphere, in technical terms, it can be said that the 2024 immigration law did not immediately have an effect on the respondents as all of them entered Hungary before the laws came into effect. Although this direct legal interference is not apparent, the interviewees mention the ways they are or ought to be affected. The paper is going to go into the dimensions of the former. The majority of the respondents express the main concern being the process of acquiring or maintaining a work permit, which secures their stay in Hungary. Several candidates were in a midway category in the process of shifting to a work permit after graduation, waiting for approval on a new work permit when changing employers, waiting to be approved for a job-seeking visa, or considering applying for permanent residence. The immigration laws interfered with all of these considerations.

When analysing long-term plans, the relationship between the immigration framework and its outcomes is also clearly significant. As a researcher, I got the opportunity to gain insight and perspective from my interviewees about how initial plans and stay in Hungary got reshaped because of the legal shift in immigration policy. Results indicate varying intentions by most respondents

only planning until the end of their study period or fulfilling a year-long job opportunity and leaving the question of the future open to negotiation. On the other hand, some respondents mentioned perceiving Hungary as only a temporary period in their lives. Within this category, all prioritised self-development and skill accumulation in their university and labour market journey to some extent.

While some, like Henri-Armand, came with a clear development-oriented plan, others, such as Nicolás, arrived on impulse, seeing Hungary as a temporary escape. This range illustrates the diverse life strategies migrants employ.

> *'I decided to change really my entire life and move to the other side of the world here in Budapest. So I decided to move because it was right timing, I think I was extremely drunk. Didn't have anything to lose. Honestly, it was not like a premeditated decision on my end. It was not something that I thought directly. It was just more of a thing that felt right at the time. So I know that I came here just for the sake of having an international experience and working abroad and living in Europe and all these, but it was never my intention to stay here.' (Nicolás)*

Revisiting the theme of transition in legal status, the new legal developments pose a paradoxical situation for third-country students after graduation by extending liberties in working hours, nonetheless fixing employers, which can also surface issues in skill development.

> *'Actually, with the new law, I can work full time next to school. But what if I want to work and go back to school permanently? How will I shift to another job after and do my Master's for instance? How does that work? Because you know, with the new laws, you cannot apply for it. So am I not going to be able to stay here after I study?' (Amir)*

As seen in the story of Amir and others like him, who were considering elongating their stay in Hungary by a few extra years to gain experience in the labour market, the anticipated future took a turn. Amir intended to go back to university to get his Master's degree after his gap year of useful work experience. With the legal considerations in effect, he can only go back to study if he manages to keep the same job for the entire duration of the Master's program or by applying for a study visa from his home country. Both these scenarios have their limitations especially if it is considered that Amir built a remarkably close connection to Hungary and was even ready to settle down, get married here at some point.

Beyond the fact that for most, the laws put an expiry date on the possibility of staying in Hungary, there are a few words of criticism the interviews shed light on. From a temporal and information transmission point of view, we can spot several discrepancies. In the case of Beatriz and Yassin, the biggest difficulty is trying to reshape and make decisions based on the lack of information and uncertainty in their options considering further potential changes.

Across interviews, uncertainty was the most consistent emotional thread. Many participants described feeling in a state of constant vigilance: "*I'm always worried about the near future; for now, two years and a half I have never been, let's say, relaxed 100%. I have always to think*." said Yassin, while Beatriz admitted, "*I get a little anxious about the changing because I was preparing to maybe apply for the permanent residence and now they changed it*." This collective sense of being destabilized supports Sandoz's (2020) argument that uncertainty is not a byproduct but a feature of immigration governance used to control, filter, and exhaust migrants without formal exclusion.

Undeniably, the most decisive feeling in the highlighted journeys is uncertainty, supplemented by despair and anxiety about the future. Yassin originally came here to study but transitioned to a work permit early on to gain as much experience as possible. Shortly after the 2024 law came into effect, he was able to secure approval from his company for a work permit lasting for two more years. Alas, the project he was working on at the given company ceased operations, leading to his next employment being counted as an extension. The chain of events that Yassin encountered is one of the most devastating effects that a migrant can get by losing a year of confirmed stay in the country. This sense of precarity echoes what Melegh & Sárosi (2015) describe as the structural instability faced by third-country nationals, shaped by selective immigration regimes.

Staying with the apparent legal changes and impact on plans, we can recognize that not only those looking forward to entry into Hungary but also those who have been living here for a couple of years become subject to the change to a great extent on several levels.

Moving towards the even more chaotic scenarios and life stories that the interviewees had to live through, we can take the situation of Kim into consideration. She transferred from a student visa to a work visa (for employment purposes) to a job-seeking visa. Lim worked extremely hard to secure a job after completion of her Master's degree in Hungary and ceasing project of her previous employer. She switched to a job-seeking visa to enlarge her chances and even managed to get an offer from a multinational company with a promising salary, development options, and,

of course, primarily a chance to stay in Hungary. The 2025 law, which limits the influx of third-country individuals for employment purposes, came into effect a week before her final appointment. This would have granted her stability and free return to Hungary. She expresses her opinion in detail about how this timing affected her in an unfortunate way, erasing all her progress leading up to not being able to return to Hungary.

> *"If you have a job-seeking visa, you have to apply for it from your home country. It's really, you know, unfair. And it doesn't make any sense at all. So if you have job-seeking visa, why do you have to fly back to your home country? So why do you call it a visa? I would say it's very unprofessional and racist. It's just my feeling because at least you give a time frame for them, especially those who already got an appointment like me because I spent money.' (Lim)*

The words of criticism embedded in the words of Lim resonate with what Beatriz and Yassin expressed regarding the timing of the laws. The other emphasized common point lies in the undergone range of emotions. The feeling of uncertainty is coupled with disappointment, frustration and urgency as a ledge erodes in one's life over the course of a few months. She described how this unravelled both her plans and her emotional state:

> *'I feel like for now I'm like a depressed person that I have never experienced before in my life. I feel like they should think about it before they change those laws.'(Lim)*

Additionally, the same feeling of constant uncertain ground and ceasing livelihood in Hungary is present in the story of Amir. Amir has just started working at a reliable, promising multinational company in a position aligned with his degree, securing his future with a stable income, relocation opportunities within the European Union, and a promise to climb the company ladder. Although he did his best at the time, he was terminated just before the end of his probation period, leaving him with just about a week to locate and convince an employer to sponsor his employment visa, thus residence permit.

> *'So to make a long story short, I just kept going around the city of Budapest and trying to find something even like a job offer that doesn't really have to require skills. Just assess me and whatever. I just need a job offer. I don't want to leave. So I would say this new law of you having to leave the country in a few days after the determination of your residency is mind-blowing, and it's very unfair to a lot of people.'(Amir)*

As Amir and those before him express their impressions, the changing legal framework can undermine years of work and development in the labour market in a few seconds. Returning to the experiences of Lim, the sudden drop in status and disappearance of a recently safe future is striking. Despite Lim investing all of her time and energy on job searching and consulate appointments, as well as being backed by a legal team and a supportive company also willing to provide a high enough salary for the EU Blue card, she did all in vain.

> *'They waited for three more weeks, and yesterday I will say I just got the final email from my company that the offer that they gave me was withdrawn. They finally withdrew my application, so I no longer have a chance of getting back. They waited for three weeks and nothing was changed. Yeah, but I still can feel that we didn't have a lot of chance.' (Lim)*

In the scenarios explored above, the interviewees got a glimpse of what their life could have been like in the long term and also lost it swiftly. The argument of the analysis remains around the variation of third-country workers being substantial and the legal distinction of skilled/unskilled not being up to par with the spectrum of life situations one can encounter in an employment journey, leading to the legal criteria sieve even those third-country workers who display promising results, ambition, and belonging to Hungary.

5.1.2. Emotional Responses to Uncertainty and Restriction

So far, I have presented the general implications of the legal shift guided by the varying situations and experiences of the interviewees. It has been explored how long-term plans are often destroyed or replaced by transitory situations attempting to secure further stay in Hungary. These experiences are emotionally loaded to a great extent, which will be elaborated upon. Plans remain in focus since separating the emotional and practical side of experiences is unimaginable.

Understandably, respondents had strong emotional reactions to the new legal motion being staggered and uprooting their previous plans and calculations, for example, understanding it as "A clear get out of my country" or "they're basically telling people to leave the country in a respectful manner." as expressed by Isabella and Amir. For many, this uncertainty turned into frustration. Isabella shared her disbelief at the contradictory nature of the legal framework:

> *'And then as if that wasn't terrible, they come up with this, you cannot apply for a work permit if it's your first time, so. So what do you mean? Like we will not be able to apply for it because if there's no first time, then there's no second time.' (Isabella)*

In addition to the articulation of strong feelings of uncertainty sparked by the changing immigration framework, the span of the laws also affects the livelihood of entire communities, even those with jobs lined up and skills to account for.

> *'It didn't only ruin my plans because I know so many people got job offers, which is already so ******* difficult. And they could not because of these ******* laws. I know friends that already have jobs. They are very well positioned. They have like full-time job offers after they graduate, and now they just can't. I don't understand it. But anyway. It does affect people like me tremendously and people around me too.' (Isabella)*

As the legal effects penetrate the social circle of foreigners, the future of existing relationships raises concerns both for relationships forged before entry to Hungary and those created within. As the introduction has been going on from the methodology section, I refer back to four interviewees being in a relationship at the time of the interview. When analyzing interviewees in a relationship, only females mentioned a strong consideration for their relationship in terms of future plans and willingness to think of it as a main motivational factor in choosing a country to live in.

> *'And also, right now, I'm in a relationship with my boyfriend, who is Hungarian. And also, if it changes something, what about getting married and changing the status, to see if it could be beneficial? But no, because I still will need a work permit. I will be able to stay here, but I wouldn't be able to work, so I think they also think in this way that they create the laws thinking: Let's limit all the options so less people will be able to work or stay.'(Beatriz)*

As displayed, Beatriz and her boyfriend weigh options of marriage, indicating speeding up their relationship and arriving at a decisive point in one's life. In the case of Isabella, although marriage isn't even an option, she actively looks for solutions for her relationship to endure while not needing to sacrifice life standards. This aligns with Kováts and Soltész (2022), who highlight the intrusive effects of immigration frameworks on private life decisions, including family formation and emotional stability.

> *'I wanted to stay for that reason and also because of, you know, my relationship and I just kind of wanted to build a stable thing with my girlfriend. We also thought of moving to another European country in which I don't require a visa. The thing is: what do we do there? Imagine if it's hard to get a job here; imagine in another country. Like you know, we could wash dishes and sweep floors. And I was like, you know, we could be living*

comfortably in my home. We can be very comfortable. And we don't have to do all this to sustain Europe.' (Isabella)

Both Beatriz and Isabella went through all possible scenarios for them to secure the future of their relationships as it actively shaped their plans and stay in Hungary. Similarly, we can see that the loss of friends has a negative impact on the interviewees; however, being lonely by itself doesn't make them decide on leaving the country.

'I lose friends. I lose a lot of friends because of this. Recently one of my close friends had to leave because of the law. So yeah, it definitely feels like it's targeted to make it make it a harder time for foreigners to stay. It definitely feels like that.' (Karim)

The attack on migrant social networks that the legal environment facilitates influences even those third-country nationals with a stable livelihood, for example permanent residence. Karim embodies this group by reflecting on the hardships the legal environment poses for his picture of the future. He mentioned an almost identical feeling as Isabella about looking into moving to another country, in his case Spain, as an aftermath of the legal specifications.

Yassin, once determined to settle long-term, shared how the changing climate undermined his original intentions: "*I was thinking to stay more, get into the culture, learn the language, plan a long-term life. But not anymore."* Similarly, some interviewees expressed a deep connection to Hungary and voiced confusion at being seen as outsiders. This contradiction between emotional attachment and policy exclusion formed one of the most painful dynamics in participants' accounts.

'If you at least want to come, just be sure that it's just a stage. A short stage in your life' (Yassin)

For some, the legal system is so opaque that hope itself dissolves. *"I don't have much chances I believe to stay, 'I'm not gonna, you know, put my effort and resources, get a lawyer for them to deport me. I want to keep my dignity"* said Isabella, summarizing what many described as a slow denial of future, identity, and plans. This aligns with findings on the emotional precarity of migrants caught in rapidly shifting bureaucratic contexts (Melegh, 2016).

The general susceptibility of migrants to negative feelings in an unknown environment is exaggerated by the ever-changing legal setting, which is going to be revisited in detail with reference to support systems.

In summary, the legal changes noticeably resculpt the initial picture of the researched population, especially in transitory situations and milestones in lifepaths. Additionally, the

unforeseen and drastic change in the legal framework linked to the surfacing uncertainty and difficulties also presents itself as one of the most apparent patterns. In this section, I have addressed the aspect of relationships and community acting as a decisive factor and playing into the long-term decisions of third-country individuals.

5.2 Hierarchical differences

As described above, the paper follows along the inflection points prompted by the legal shift. In the subsequent passages, I analyse how labor market position transforms lifepaths. The multifaceted nature of hierarchical differences to be analysed includes the position of migrants in an exchange within global capitalism, variation within third-country individuals by the magnitude of skills, and rank within the Hungarian labour market.

5.2.1. Hierarchical dynamics in the impact of the immigration framework: Exploring the skilled-unskilled divide

The specifications of the 2024-2025 immigration framework drew a clear line between skilled and unskilled workers in legal terms. To clarify, I use the terms "skilled" and "unskilled" solely in the context of the 2024 immigration law for the purposes of easing comparison. By this typology, "skilled" refers to EU Blue Card and Hungarian Card eligibility, whereas "unskilled" refers to the general residence permit for employment purposes. As will be shown, this binary fails to reflect the fluid and uneven labour market realities that semi-skilled third-country nationals face in Hungary. Conversely, attaining the EU Blue card is equally challenging due to its requirements in job sector, prior experience as well as minimum net salary of 883,671 HUF. This aligns with the dual labour market theory (Massey et al., 1993), which frames immigrants as funneled into secondary labour market positions, regardless of individual qualifications.

Drawing from the interview material, this section explores how legal status intersects with educational background, language proficiency, and employer support to shape migrants' access to jobs and work conditions. Major themes include labour market entry barriers, hiring preferences, the benefits of multinational company employment, and the psychological and structural consequences of deskilling.

As demonstrated, the interview participants scale from fresh graduates with little relevant experience to professionals working in line with their degree and continuously evolving. Firstly, let us take a look at the starting point of the scale calling for insights from soon-to-be and bachelor graduates. As mentioned by Isabella, her chances of being hired were virtually complicated, as employers prioritized degree holders.

> *'For students, it's not easy to get a job related to your career because I can say the labor market for students, not only students here in Hungary, is somehow closed.'(Henri-Armand)*

The interviewees indicated that the legal shift tends to filter out fresh graduates by blocking their entry into the labour market, thus hindering stay in Hungary. Amir elaborates on this experience and clarifies that getting your first full-time job after graduation would also be difficult as a Hungarian owing to employers recruiting the best and most experienced candidates out of the vast supply of young talent.

> *'It's quite, you know, narrow, and everyone is just trying to apply for a job at the same time. Many graduate students are international students trying to find jobs. And yeah, the job market, is quite challenging and competitive. So from my experience at least it took you three months or four months to find a proper one.' (Amir)*

When analysing the experiences, it is also important to note that most third-country university students barely get their permits approved until their graduation date, not to mention a three-four month period that could suffice for being hired. Still, it is essential to highlight the substantial gap in hiring experiences. As we have seen, fresh graduates and those with ongoing studies face increasing difficulties in hiring. On the contrary, skilled interviewees enjoy greater freedom in choosing an employer. As expressed by Isabella, who herself is still to graduate, a Master's degree in a highly specialized field combined with a strong base salary is the component that allows third-country nationals to be streamlined into the skilled legal categorization.

> *'I mean my best friend is a computer science major and he actually got to apply for the EU blue card and he got accepted. He will be getting it soon, but that's because he makes a very high salary. (Isabella)*

In addition, skilled individuals with a Master's or equivalent degree, as well as years of professional work experience also indicated significantly less difficulties in securing a job proving the argument on the skilled-unskilled divide. Similarly, Lim, Beatriz, Yassin, and Nicolás—all with graduate

degrees and corporate experience—navigated the labour market with relative ease. One advantage was multilingualism, which allowed them to meet salary thresholds and increased their appeal to employers. As Yassin observed:

'*Because of the languages they speak, I have more advantage on the job market.' (Yassin)*

Nicolás made a similar point:

'And considering that I usually apply for positions where I need to use my language I know that I'm at an advantage compared to a lot of people because they either speak Spanish or Portuguese or natively speak English. And I'm able to speak the three of them, so I think it helped in that aspect.'(Nicolás)

Going from the components of labour market advantages in educational, professional and linguistic profiles, the underlying framework has to be addressed, resembling the entry point approach of Kováts and Soltész (2022).

When analysing hiring mechanisms, the sharpest contrast that surfaced was between Latin-American and Hungarian hiring requirements, with Hungary being more flexible and experience-focused.

'Because for example, back in Costa Rica. Getting a job. I think it's a lot harder in terms of if you are not qualified academically, you're not going to be even like considered for the position versus here that way too many positions, and I've been called to many positions where I don't have the knowledge whatsoever but I've been able to like work properly and that's great.' (Nicolás)

This easy-going mindset of hiring present in Hungary allows individuals exceeding a specific qualification more free-rein and professional flexibility. Just as in hiring processes, in terms of relocation and legal support high-skilled individuals receive increasing aid when compared to their lower-skilled counterparts. The mentioned support can range from a company providing essential information about application opportunities for the differing legal categories to an entire legal team being at the disposal of the employee exceeding work-related legal support, for example in arranging family reunification essential for maintaining existential stability (Kováts & Soltész, 2022). The following quotes illustrate the dividing point among third-country workers in Hungary, in light of the 2024 immigration shift.

'They hired lawyers and then like, basically, you just need to go to the Immigration Office and just do my signatures and fingerprints. I remember that in the very beginning when

they changed the law and for the people that they were about to expire, they needed to change everything, but the companies were standing up for their employees.'(Nicolás)

However, even well-resourced employers face limitations under the new framework. Lim shared the breakdown of her case:

'After that I was in touch with the legal team. I discussed with my company regarding the EU Blue card option. It's not easy for them either. So you need to meet the salary requirement, the job code. Like my problem is my company was also willing to offer the Blue Card, but because of the job code it doesn't fit with my degree. Yeah, they didn't have any other options.' (Lim)

This illustrates how multiple bottlenecks—salary, degree relevance, job code—converge to create an extremely narrow path toward skilled legal status (Štrajn, 2016). In the words of Amir:

'I would say that a lot of opportunities and a lot of like possibilities that maybe we had before. For example, regarding getting citizen card or applying for European citizenship card like cards and all that. It's now near to impossible to be able to apply for them because they will cut you under the minimum amount of years that you require of constantly living here to apply for it.' (Amir)

Remaining within the scope of opportunities, however, going into the aspect of working conditions, it must be mentioned that skilled foreigners within the classification framework possess elevated potential for acceptance into a multinational company. Being a skilled worker allows a greater chance to apply for an EU Blue Card and become an employee in a multinational company, which is often synonymous with legal stability, development opportunities, high salary, and easy integration in the context of migrant lifepaths. In short, multinational companies provide a much-needed extra layer of comfort for third-country nationals compared to those employed in smaller companies, temporary work, and outsourcing.

In the example of Lim, she decided to turn to informal channels such as Facebook groups out of desperation.

'I also joined one immigration team/group on Facebook called immigration help something?'(Lim)

'He was able to hire a lawyer, which is not something that everyone gets to do so.'(Isabella)

When connecting the features of multinational or regular companies with the skilled-unskilled divide, we can also take note of the daily tasks and overall position of international workers. When revisiting the target population being service sector workers, the interview results indicate a tendency of higher-skilled individuals to be employed in more specialized and back-office jobs, whereas their lower-skilled counterparts do customer service in the traditional sense by handling direct calls or face-to-face interactions with clients. The interviewees also channeled awareness of this scope and their desire to shift to professional environments demanding skilled competences. Many interviewees, particularly those with graduate degrees, expressed frustration at being stuck in front-line customer service roles despite broader qualifications. This echoes the findings of Pajnik (2012) on deskilling as systemic, not accidental.

> *It's so hard, it's so difficult and that's why I think like I would position myself better in a job that doesn't have to deal with people all day long. Of course, I would have to deal with people, but I would like to deal with professionals.*

In summary, high-skilled migrant workers are rewarded by being elevated to a back-office or professional ticketing-system-based workplace.

Although legal categorization in Hungary defines migrants as either "skilled" or "unskilled," interview data suggests a much more fluid and uneven reality. Access to skilled status depends not only on degrees and work experience but also on salary levels, job codes, language knowledge, and employer support. In practice, the immigration framework rewards those with specific assets while limiting opportunities for others—often regardless of motivation or ability.

Multinational companies often act as buffers against the harshest impacts of the law, but not all migrants have access to this layer of support. Most participants worked in non-standard forms of work, which are 26characterized by low or zero extra benefits and allowances for at least part of their time in Hungary (Smith, 2005). This imbalance contributes to a sense of being replaceable, undervalued, and stuck.

Understanding the fluidity of these experiences, rather than relying solely on static legal categories, is key to assessing the real impact of Hungary's immigration policy.

5.2.2. Labour market realities: The Employment landscape for Foreigners in Hungary

After introducing the main inflection points of the immigration law and their effects on labour market access, this section now shifts focus to what it means to be a foreigner navigating

the Hungarian workplace—not only in hiring but also in working conditions, advancement, and overall recognition. While hiring and legal categories remain a core analytical axis, the discussion now explores how foreignness itself becomes a differentiating factor in migrant life paths.

Interestingly, some respondents showed a sense of awareness regarding the positionality of international workers in Hungary by identifying as labour force.

'You know, that's why they bring international people here, so we can be the labor force, and we have so much to offer. But no, the opportunities are just very scarce.' (Isabella)

This framing aligns closely with **world-systems theory**, which conceptualizes migration as a response to structural inequalities between regions, where periphery labour is mobilized to meet core or semi-periphery demands (Wallerstein, 1974). But in Hungary, that demand does not translate to open doors. Legal status quickly becomes a bottleneck. Primarily, the magnified effects of the immigration laws can be observed in the form of instant rejection and a restricted scope of reachable job opportunities. Despite skills and experience, visa dependency continues to be a key barrier. Several respondents shared stories of abrupt rejections once their immigration status was disclosed:

'They called me… I need this visa… and then that's it. One or two days later I get the email saying, thank you, but we moved on.'(Nicolás)

'Normally I ended up getting a rejection later because of the visa. Sometime while I was doing the interview, the manager just stopped me and started asking me about the visa status and then they said no to me.'(Lim)

Yassin highlighted how laws directly shape employability:

'I think I'm considered a lot but every time the laws make it more complicated or difficult for companies to hire me.'(Yassin)

Even when legal status wasn't directly referenced, comparisons with Hungarian citizens revealed a disadvantage.

'Oh well, since I came back, you know, I've been searching for jobs. And my girlfriend also was searching for jobs. And she got two jobs in the meantime, I've had none. So I would say better. Like, yeah, million times better.'(Isabella)

Staying with this train of thought, obtaining "*normal opportunities,"* as pinpointed by Amir, refers to the difficulties of getting a job requiring a relevant degree or simply getting an office job at all. The interviewees mentioned that it is not rare to take physical or low-status jobs as a foreigner

just to maintain their living standards in Hungary. Despite having studied and worked in Hungary, the participants found that their legal category, as much as their skills, determined access to meaningful employment. Many described this experience as a form of **structural deskilling**, in which migrants are pushed into roles well below their educational or professional background.

'Yeah but it's just to survive anyway that's what I would say.' (Henri-Armand)

As the interviewees comment on the topic, it becomes apparent that a dual labour market is present in Hungary, with an overwhelming tendency of foreigners to be concentrated in secondary labour market positions (Massey et al., 1993; Hudson, 2007). Several interviewees confirm the tendency of deskilling phenomena by taking up jobs well below their competences with an unfavorable working environment. The overall working conditions portray unstable, informal features leading to international workers being at risk of vulnerability.

'I did not have a contract for the ice cream shop., a very informal job, it was mostly international people.'(Isabella)

'Well, personally, I can say not stable. This kind of jobs they're working because they are not to grant you everything you need as an employee. In certain jobs, it's just like if your boss wakes up in the morning with a mood, he can say: okay, you guys, you have to go home. For example, if you do this, we will be terminating your contract directly without any notice.' (Henri-Armand)

It can be derived from analysing feelings of being valued by employers that respondents feel they lack certain rights, support, and benefits. Replaceability combined with inferior working conditions and lower pay compared to Hungarian counterparts naturally create complex and often contradictory sentiments, especially if one believes Hungary requires and attracts foreign workers to recompense the labour market within a global exchange (Melegh, 2016).

'And you need to come to terms with the fact that you are just a number in that system and you're very easily replaceable.' (Karim)

This aligns with the broader literature on selective preferential regimes (Lippens et al., 2022), where non-naturalized migrants face compounded disadvantages: limited mobility, lower job security, and diminished professional recognition. The policy frameworks not only reinforce existing inequalities but make it harder for migrants to ascend to more stable or rewarding positions.

'So the Hungarians were getting paid more because they're natives, which I think is very unfair because you're doing the same job. Just because the other person is from a different

country, they're just going to get paid less. But with multinational companies or local companies, it's nothing like that.' (Yassin)

This perception highlights the persistent native–foreigner divide, where nationality remains a determining factor in perceived fairness, pay, and career mobility despite equal qualifications or performance. Despite Yassin indicating that salary-wise international companies cannot differentiate based on nationality, Nicolás sticks with the question of being valued with components of dependence on the employer, who provides his means of living.

'If I do something really wrong they're the first people to be aware of the situation and then they can either fire me or like you know get me back to my country. So basically I'm just property of my company.'(Nicolás)

Revisiting customer service with respect to the target population working in the service sector, specifically business administration and customer services occupations remains part of constructing the positionality of international workers in Hungary often in the above-detailed secondary labour market. As I referenced previously, despite holding degrees or professional experience, many respondents found themselves hired mainly for their language skills, which are valuable for a company targeting a foreign market, not for their broader qualifications.

'So for customer support executive, I can say it's not quite relevant to my experiences, but I think it's a good chance to improve my communications.'(Lim)

Without exception, respondents highlighted the key improvements owing to customer service being communication skills empathy and the attribute of giving some perspective in the occupational hierarchy.

These expressions of advancement were coupled with awareness of being looked down upon or, for instance, only taking the job due to high demand and personal desperation as a foreigner despite not being able to advance nor gain career-relevant experience. The section has previously touched upon foreigners being subject to deskilling by taking physical jobs as a temporary solution and now it shifts to conveying the resembling alternative of customer service in terms of mentally taxing outcomes.

'From what I've been able to ascertain last two years is probably one of the lowest jobs you can get in an industry in corporate. If construction is a job where you need to physically where is very physically demanding, customer support is the mental job that is physically

demanding. So it is a mentally extremely draining job, and I genuinely would not recommend it to anyone who is not mentally resilient enough to handle it.'(Karim)

As seen in the beautiful analogy of Karim, for most foreign workers in alike life situations the drawbacks outweigh the gains.

'It was just testing your patience every day because people are really stupid. It's a very difficult job. People are underestimating how hard we work because it's just so hard to deal with people all day, like hearing you know it actually takes life and brain cells out of you because you are drained out. There are skills that you do gather from it, but if I can I would avoid it. I won't do it again unless it's very few times a day. That's it.'(Isabella)

Related to the impressions of Isabella regarding not favouring customer service positions in the future, labour market mobility gains extra relevance. Once again, despite having a Master's degree and years of experience in one's home country, the native-foreigner divide prevails over the low-high skilled cleavage, as seen in the example of Beatriz, who ended up transitioning to a field she had no experience or qualifications in.

'I was trying to change to go on my field like more related to psychology and I wouldn't find anything.' (Beatriz)

One can argue that the Hungarian hiring setting values practical skills over specialized qualifications, particularly in customer service, where operations are outsourced to Hungary, yet foreign language skills are essential.

'Also at work because you know certain teams or jobs need that specific language, so I think that I have more advantage. Also, if it is just communication with everyone, as I said, it's international companies, so everyone speaks English.'(Yassin)

Whilst on the beneficial side of it, it can be understood that knowledge of an extra language can boost one's career greatly, a language barrier is ingrained into everyday life of the researched population. I argue that the presence of language difficulties is clearly relevant, as it acts as an additional selection effect solidified by the 2025 immigration law. Specifically, the introduced motion of passing a cultural exam in Hungarian for gaining permanent residency. This requirement seems to screen those foreigners who are willing and able to integrate into Hungarian society.

Most respondents made an allusion to difficulty in hiring processes in terms of language requirements as well, leading to an additional filtering effect.

'Of course, for other foreign languages, you can see you fit the job description, but language barrier, that's the main problem.' (Henri-Armand)

As seen in the experiences of Henri-Armand, even if third-country nationals match the criteria of a job posting, between communicating their needs and the company matching their skills with an appropriate offer, an obstacle is present.

'And for most of the companies like, even though, like the main language is English like they require at least like a basic level of knowledge of Hungarian'. (Nicolás)

As Hungarian language proficiency emerges as a dividing criteria, employers also indicate the lack of willingness to adapt to the conditions of third-country workers. This standing of companies mentioned by the interviewees affects labour market position from being hired to navigating the workplace, and promotion.

'They always ask that you speak Hungarian or not.. If you can speak the language, it's quite convenient for you to communicate at the workplace in what we call the majority. You know it's Hungarian.. If you don't know the language it's also limiting you from job market and everything.'(Lim)

With reference to hierarchical differences in the job market, the candidates who were able to enter a multinational company display staggeringly different experiences as if in the workplace they were not even recognizably in Hungary.

'I never touched like any problem with that because we need to support basically in English or other language, so even Hungarian people they speak another language other than English.'(Beatriz)

'With the Hungarian language, yeah. At work. There is like no need for it.'(Yassin)

Although the respondents leaning towards the high-skilled spectrum mentioned ease in corporate communication, which could be owing to proficiency in several languages, selection also affects them when it comes to promotions. The workplace environment in Hungary is predominantly marked by easier advancement for Hungarians and those with a stable legal status securing their livelihood.

'My current boss, she's Hungarian. My level 2, like he's higher than my boss, is also Hungarian.'(Beatriz)

Beatriz acknowledges her labour market standing and recognizes that while foreign workers take up challenging, fast-paced jobs, management roles tend to consist of a majority of Hungarians.

Yassin resonates with this stream of thought, and adds the shaping aspect of Hungarian language skills as a determining factor of mobility.

> *'And in different hotels because I did have a friend also. I didn't encounter any foreigners in support management. But when it comes to multinationals or whether are just companies, European companies. There are, of course, more Hungarians in the management roles. But to be honest even most of the foreigners that are in the management do speak Hungarian and most probably do have either Hungarian citizenship or a permanent residency.' (Yassin)*

Undeniably, language requirements play into these organizational mechanisms. Nevertheless, with given effort and skills, escaping volatile work environments and positions remains possible even for third-country individuals.

> *'It's always good to know that in general, foreigners will always have a bit of a harder time sort of moving around.'(Karim)*
>
> *'And also if you are hard-working then you also get yeah, get a chance to be promoted as well. Overall, I am not sure I can say that to you, but based on my experience, I can see that you still have a chance to have room for improvement and also getting promoted. Yeah, it depends on the company.' (Lim)*

This section illustrates how the interplay between foreign status, legal category, language, and job type produces a deeply hierarchical employment landscape. Even when foreign workers secure jobs, they are often steered into roles far below their capabilities, subject to unstable contracts, informal treatment, and emotional burnout. The line between "skilled" and "unskilled" blurs when legal obstacles, employer discretion, and workplace culture undermine equal access to career development.

5.3. Existential stability and social connectivity

Throughout the findings, components of existential stability—such as legal status, financial wellbeing, emotional resilience, and access to support—have surfaced repeatedly as fragile foundations in the lives of third-country migrants in Hungary. This section brings these threads together more explicitly, focusing on how migrants attempt to maintain stability while navigating low-paying, insecure jobs, limited recognition, and a lack of institutional support. The broader

implication is that the 2024 and 2025 immigration frameworks do not only shape labour market outcomes, but gradually erode the existential ground beneath migrant life.

As previously noted, the majority of participants work in the service sector, often in outsourced or front-line role that reflect the secondary labour market described by Massey et al. (1993) and Hudson (2007). Many shared that despite holding degrees from Hungarian institutions and speaking multiple languages, their compensation remained below their created value with few benefits and little long-term security. Nicolás, recalling his student work experience, described the economic reality bluntly:

> *"I was working 24 hours a week, sometimes 20 hours, and I was getting paid the minimum wage. In 2021, it was 850 Ft an hour. So I was making around 90,000 [HUF] a month. Plus my scholarship. So that was…"(Nicolás)*

Karim echoed this frustration later in his professional journey:

> *"Compensation-wise, I don't think I'm being compensated enough for the work that I do." (Karim)*

These underwhelming earnings aren't merely personal disappointments—they reflect a broader trend of deskilling and labour segmentation, in which migrants are structurally directed toward lower-status, lower-paid work. In response to low wages and limited recognition, many participants described working long hours, balancing multiple responsibilities, or sacrificing personal development and social life, simply to stay afloat. The abolition of personal income tax exemption for those under 25 undermines roughly half of the respondents. Even holders of student visas who are completing their internships suffer from this financial cut. This differentiation between native Hungarians and third-country individuals also creates feelings of tension. Amplification of the inferiority of third-country individuals communicated by the immigration rhetoric inherently causes alienation. Henri-Armand explained:

> *"Of course, you need to greet your workmates and hey, how are you doing, and then do your job. And after ending your job, just go home. I think the reason is just a hard, tight schedule. You can't even get to know your neighbour." (Henri-Armand)*

In this way, lower compensation and lack of substantial benefits for those already in challenging life situations often lead to dissatisfaction with work life and feelings of exploitation, having an impact on emotional well-being. It can be detected that efforts to remain financially stable directly conflict with the time and energy required to build social networks, deepen

community ties, or improve one's legal standing. Many found themselves choosing survival over integration—not out of unwillingness, but due to structural exhaustion. This aligns with Guzi et al. (2023), who emphasize that existential security is about time, connection, and the ability to project oneself into a future.

Language emerged again as a critical factor, not only in hiring processes but in daily life.

> *'Sometimes I feel like I am excluded from the conversation because I don't speak Hungarian…this type of connectivity is quite hard because we don't actually know the topic when they discuss it in Hungarian, and so I feel excluded.'(Lim)*

Nicolás expressed this even more starkly:

> *"Living here, not knowing the language, it's quite difficult… I will never be part of the community." (Nicolás)*

Even within multinational companies, where English was the main language, Hungarian remained the dominant social code. Amir described how language created a ceiling on integration:

> *"If they need to speak to me or they need me to understand something, then they will switch to English. But besides this, it was just Hungarian." (Amir)*

The inability to fully participate in informal interactions or group conversations fed into a broader sense of isolation. This situation worsened as friends and acquaintances left the country, either voluntarily or by legal force. Lim's reflection captured this perfectly:

> *"I can say I have one group that I normally get together with, spend our time together—like 6 people. Five of them already left Hungary and I felt lonely. At a time, I almost gave up." (Lim)*

In some cases, the loss of social networks led to emotional withdrawal. It is apparent that as a foreigner in an unknown country, all the support that one can attain is necessary. When considering support systems, a strong divide surfaced between the genders. All three female respondents emphasized the role of external emotional support systems, such as close friends or partners, as crucial for coping with uncertainty. This contrasts with the male respondents' narratives, where emotional resilience was framed more through individualism and self-reliance. This gendered divergence in coping mechanisms aligns with broader gender studies findings, where women often articulate communal support as essential for well-being, while men may internalize hardship or avoid sharing distress (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hochschild, 2007).

‘But I think the first person now that I rely on it will be my boyfriend or a friend who is here with me. They would be my support system to rely on because on my own I wouldn't know what to do.’ (Beatriz)

This contrast becomes more apparent when juxtaposed with male respondents, several of whom described themselves as their primary or only support system, often out of necessity rather than choice. For male participants in particular, support systems were often described in individualistic terms. Amir shared:

“I always like to depend on myself… My biggest support system there is myself. Because at the end of the day, I’m here as a foreigner. Anything can happen. I’m all on my own.” (Amir)

Henri-Armand similarly reflected:

"I'm the person who just tries to solve my stuff before sharing it with anyone, even with my family. If I'm far away, I don't want to share with them some harmful situation I'm facing. I can't even tell them what is happening.” (Henri-Armand)

These self-reliant coping strategies were not necessarily signs of emotional strength, but of having adapted to a setting where institutional, emotional, and legal support are all uncertain or absent. The removal of financial predictability, the limitations on social and linguistic inclusion, and the fragility of networks collectively hollow out the conditions of stable living.

When viewed together, these observations underscore that the recent legal reforms do not only restructure migration policy—they reshape migrant life at every level. As the framework becomes stricter, it simultaneously undermines all three pillars of existential security: financial stability, social inclusion, and future planning.

6. Conclusion

The thesis has examined how Hungary’s 2024-2025 change in immigration framework affects the labour market experiences and life paths of third-country nationals, with particular focus on individuals employed in the service sector. The research has shown that recent legal developments in form of how Government Decree 35/2024 (II. 29.) has redefined access to employment and long-term residence by introducing strict legal distinctions between “skilled” and “unskilled” workers. These categories have material implications that go far beyond legal

terminology, shaping the types of jobs third-country nationals can access, the support they receive from employers, and their ability to remain in the country.

The perceived structural and hierarchical position of the interviewees positioned within the wider dimension of Hungary as a semi-periphery country participating in an unequal exchange aligns well with the characteristics of the migration regime of the country (Melegh, 2016; Melegh & Sárosi, 2015). The ideological and structural forces in place, such as selective preferential policies coupled with compensating for the emigration tendency of skilled Hungarians pose as the ideologized solution of protecting Hungary from immigration, thus ensuring economic and demographic stability (Melegh, 2016, 2023). The essence of the 2024-2025 immigration shift fits into the detailed motions of the Hungarian migration regime by the legal restructuring of third-country migration acting as a form of controlled access to labour, favouring specific profiles while systematically excluding others. The findings of the thesis suggest that the newest legal changes reinforce this selective logic, pushing many third-country nationals into structurally disadvantaged positions within the labour market, regardless of their qualifications or language skills. Participants described facing instant rejection during job applications, difficulties securing residence, and limited access to professional advancement. These experiences reflect the operational logic of dual labour market theory, whereby migrants are structurally confined to secondary roles, even when their profiles exceed the requirements of these positions (Hudson, 2007; Massey et al., 1993).

The sense of being needed economically but unwanted socially and legally was a recurring theme, reflecting both world-systems dynamics and the persistence of the foreign–native divide. Interviewees consistently described the legal, professional, and emotional effects of this framework. The data highlights how legal status rather than skill level became the primary determinant of job access, contract conditions, and lifepaths. These experiences reinforcing the position of migrants as a reserve labour force comprise an essential element of the Hungarian migration regime, pointing to additional implications (Stalker, 1994). Structural deskilling, employer dependence, and exhaustion in customer-facing roles emerged as recurrent themes. While some participants were able to adapt to these constraints, the system itself proved as a barrier for integration and the marginalisation of workers who could otherwise support long-term economic goals.

The exclusion of the spectrum of experiences and needs of semi-skilled third-country nationals from the legal categories available under the new framework further reinforces this rigid structure. Despite holding relevant degrees, work experience, and language competences, these individuals were unable to access legal protection or employment options aligned with their qualifications. Their in-between status remains unacknowledged by the legal system.

Ultimately, the findings point to a labour market where foreignness intersects with legal status to create deeply stratified and fragile migrant lifepaths—calling into question the ability to maintain selective migration regimes in semi-peripheral contexts like Hungary. These findings raise critical questions about the structural direction of Hungary's migration policy, particularly regarding its long-term effects on third-country nationals positioned outside the narrow skilled–unskilled binary.

Declaration of AI usage

I hereby declare the use of AI in accordance with the university guidelines on ethical academic AI usage. During the formulation of the thesis, I have used the following AI softwares.

Grammarly Edu license provided by Corvinus University of Budapest for writing assistance, specifically improving academic language and cohesion.

ChatGPT 4.0 also in writing support, explicitly editing suggestions using prompts targeting cutting on word count and streamlining sections. Overall, for the improvement of the structure and comprehensibility of the text in a reader-friendly way.

DeepL translate for the accurate translation of the nuances in legal text.

I declare that in all instances I utilized AI supplementary to my own work and own collection of references.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide

The following interview guide was used as a flexible structure during semi-structured interviews. Prompts were adapted to the respondent's legal status and experience.

Interview guide

I. Demographic details

1.Could you please specify your age?

2.Could you please specify your nationality?

3.How long have you been staying in Hungary? Under what conditions did you originally come to Hungary?

4.Could you please tell me a bit about your residence permit type and validity?

5.Could you please tell me a bit about your family status?

- Do all of them reside in Hungary? If not, why not? Does it have legal, financial or other reasons?

II. Labour market position

6.Could you please tell me about your professional background?

7.What kind of contract do you hold in your current job?

8.How were your previous professional competences, degrees evaluated in Hungary?

9.How did your salary and benefit package mirror your skills and qualifications?

10.How have your expectations about job opportunities changed compared to when you first got to Hungary?

III. Stability, change

11.Has your legal position changed in 2024? Were you moved to another legal category due to the previous one being abolished?

- How does this change affect your livelihood in Hungary?
- What kind of impact did it have on your family if any?

12.How has your feeling of being valued by an employer change?

13.How stable do you feel in your current job? Why?

14.How satisfied are you with the current social security and benefits you enjoy based on your employment?

15 What do you expect from your future in Hungary? In what way have the legal circumstances changed this decision?

16.What are your future work plans?

17.What was the biggest difficulty concerning employment in Hungary you have faced? What or who has helped you to overcome it (if anyone)??

- How has it changed based on your years spent here?

IV. Labour market segmentation, networks

18.In your everyday work how many Hungarians do you encounter on a daily basis? What do your general interactions look like? (mixed workplaces)

19.In your work life do you foster relationships with Hungarian citizens?

20.How would you describe your experience with language in the workplace? Have language requirements affected your job options or relationships at work?

21.How would you evaluate the position of international workers in Hungary contrasted with their Hungarian counterparts?

22.How would you describe your experience in terms of workplace inclusion?

23.So you mentioned working in … How would you evaluate this field of work overall from all other available options?

24.In case something bad happened to you what or whom could you rely on?

25.Who is your most important support system?

Appendix B

Information Letter for Invitation to be Interviewed

Dear ,

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my thesis work required for my BA degree in the Institute of Sociology at Corvinus University of Budapest. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail if you decided to take part.

This study will focus on how the recent (2024) immigration law of Hungary shapes migrant lifepaths mainly in connection with employment status. Main points to be touched upon include employment circumstances, reflection on stability and plans as well as support systems.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. It will involve a semi-structured interview session lasting approximately (40-60 minutes). You retain the right to refrain from responding to any questions during the interview. Additionally, you may choose to discontinue your participation in the study at any juncture, and the decision will have no negative consequences. With your consent, the interview will be voice-recorded. Be assured that only the participating researcher (me) and the thesis supervisor will have access to the recorded data. Please also be advised that all information provided will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Your name will not be disclosed in any report resulting from the study, nonetheless, anonymous quotes may be included upon your approval.

Apart from potentially touching upon the sensitive subject of circumstances of stay in Hungary, the research does not impose any risks (eg. being reported to the Immigration Office, professional drawbacks in current job). On the contrary, participation in this study might give a better understanding of your own feelings and perceptions in relation to the current changes in the conditions of stay in Hungary.

Should you have any questions regarding this study or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me through the channel you've been recruited or by e-mail at (veronika.horvath2@stud.uni-corvinus.hu).

Thank you for participating in the study.

Sincerely,

Veronika Horváth

Appendix C

Consent form

I have read the above information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Veronika Horváth of the Department of Sociology at Corvinus University of Budapest.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be voice recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the class hand-in and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

With full knowledge of all the foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

____ YES ___ NO

I agree to have my interview voice recorded.

____ YES ___ NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any class hand-in or publication that comes of this research.

____ YES ___ NO

Participant's Name _____

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____