

'Many Benefit from You Being Undocumented Here': The Everyday Capabilities of Undocumented Immigrants in Moscow

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This critical ethnographic study was conducted among 15 immigrants originally from Caucasian and Central Asian countries, each with more than 10 years of undocumented residence in Moscow. It focuses on the everyday experiences of undocumented immigrants in a non-Western context, illustrating how informal networks, alongside official migration policies, contribute to and exploit unequal capabilities. The study emphasises the thresholds of emotions, affiliation and control over a person's environment, demonstrating power asymmetries between individuals. Given the participants' prolonged undocumented stay in Moscow, the findings demonstrate how the socio-legal context of an undocumented status facilitates informal exploitation alongside institutional operating models, aligning with migration policies in practice.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants, capability approach, critical ethnography, Moscow, immigration control, informal

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Introduction

With approximately 12 million foreigners, Russia is one of the top 5 migrant-receiving countries worldwide (McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021). The labour input of foreigners corresponds to approximately 6.4 per cent of Russia's gross domestic product, with an estimated 60 per cent of these immigrants being undocumented (Aleshkovskii, Grebenyuk, Kravets and Maksimova 2019). The definition of an undocumented immigrant is not fixed. Here, it refers to judicial administrative factors under which a very heterogeneous group of people live and work without permission. The politicisation of undocumented migration in Russia does find parallels with democratic Western policies but differs in its coercive practices that grant limited legal impunity to some of the immigrants only through corruption and bribery (Schenk 2021). As well as state authorities, undocumented immigrants engage in everyday interactions with private individuals in informal connections and networks; hence, before comparing Russia with Western countries purely from the perspective of immigration legislation and its practices, we should pay attention also to the experiences of actual capabilities realised outside the institutions (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022). Thus, instead of focusing on the processes of formal immigration legislation and its implementation with official records or on the corruption within government agencies, my study highlights the role of the less-discussed informal connections, meaning interaction and operations between private individuals and their networks, affecting the realisation of undocumented immigrants' overall capabilities. For these above-mentioned reasons my study asks how undocumented immigrants experience the significance of informal capabilities in their everyday lives. The capabilities of those who are ostensibly left out of society are seen as a central part of state economics and policy.

Immigration is a complex process across time that, due to temporary admissions and legal categorisation, increases the risk of irregularities (Farcy and Smit 2020). Besides geographical issues, temporal aspects, such as the duration of the stay, define the immigrant's status and represent a political question (Boyce 2020). My empirical analysis draws on ethnographic research among long-term undocumented immigrants with years of experience of having no formal contact with state institutions. The ramifications of the administrative status of being undocumented have left the capabilities to be organised and controlled by informal connections. The longer duration of the undocumented stay of the study participants, with the experiences of cyclical changes affecting the realisation of informal capabilities, underlines the expediency of the practice and the connection between formal and informal operation models, serving the same policy goals. Madeleine Reeves (2019) elaborates on the experiences of labour migrants in Moscow working within grey zones, where bureaucracy produces illegality and preconditions for an increase in informal payments to street bureaucrats. In her study, the queue of immigrants claiming for place and voice is a social space requiring acceptance and practices of engagement from the immigrants (Reeves 2019). In my study, the temporal aspect is visible in cyclical changes, noticeable in the experiences of available capabilities to the study participants, through which the informal becomes an integrated part of the formal operating model, steering the capabilities of those ostensibly left out of society. Although the literature has cultivated the synthesis of the grey economy, bureaucracy, and xenophobic elements as part of formal migration policies, the centrality of private actors taking part in steering the overall capabilities of undocumented immigrants is a less touched-on topic.

Moscow has been a growing research field regarding changing immigration policies and the racialisation of nationalities since the collapse of the multinational Soviet Union (see Roman 2002). The practices from 'ours' to 'others', referring to the representations of different habitants of the former Soviet republics, have had a cyclical nature in migration policies (Abashin 2016). The right-wing populist mindset shows Russia as an international conservative power striving to protect its national interests and preserve its traditions with Christian heritage (Diesen 2020); however, research has highlighted well-developed informal practices in

governance (e.g. Ledeneva 2011, 2013) with the state's capacity-building through corruption and the strategic exploitation of migrant labour (Schenk 2021). The socio-legal side of an undocumented status reveals various dependencies and challenges to human rights across borders – studies have already underlined the working mechanisms of Russian immigration legislation not as its own separate phenomenon but with several commonalities with other great powers receiving immigrants (Kubal 2016, 2020). The survival method of labour migrants is to navigate opportunities through informal channels as an integral part of their migration practices (Urinbojev 2020). The shadow economy, with its unsustainable practices, fragments institutional trust and prevents the positive impact that immigration would bring to society (Heusala and Aitamurto 2016).

The socio-legal position of an undocumented immigrant is an actual issue within the discussion of migration development, pursuing maximum financial profit while promoting engagement in international human-rights treaties. The longer duration of undocumented residence – with periodically varying amounts of capability available – gives a temporal aspect to the hypothesis of an existing synthesis between the state migration policy and experienced restrictions on capabilities negotiated informally. As such, this study focuses on the viewpoint of long-term undocumented immigrants, expressing how the numerous informal practices between private actors play their own role within immigration policies and their implementation. Focused on the end results, the experienced capabilities allow for the evaluation of the overall situation in practice without interfering with the question of differences within legal commitments and their interpretation and implementation. This also enables us to take into account the complexity of factors that affect the different settings when observing the actual prerequisites for capabilities (Nussbaum 2011). From the 10 overlapping capabilities, distinguished by Nussbaum (2000), this study pays special attention to thresholds of *emotions*, *affiliation* and *control over one's environment*, all manifesting the power asymmetries between the people, affecting their overall capabilities within society. In this paper, I begin by discussing previous studies on undocumented immigration in Russia. I then continue by presenting the theoretical framework and the research field before proceeding to the empirical analysis and conclusions.

Undocumented migration in Russia

Undocumented immigration is shown to be beneficial to many and not only because of the flow of money across borders; it is also in Russia's versatile interest to benefit from the cheap migrant labour force (e.g. Light 2016; Schenk 2018). The migrant agent is often the focus of critical discussion while the shadow economy and the legal provisions are less often the focus – or the target of action (Heusala 2017). Previous research on labour migration has approached the question from the complex socio-legal viewpoint of exploitation and state capacity-building within migration policies, where obtaining permits is made difficult and corruption – together with the grey economy – causes challenges when it comes to the interpretation of legality (e.g. Kubal 2019, 2020; Schenk 2021). Border studies concerning former Soviet Union citizens and labour migrants from Central Asia, navigating their opportunities within informal networks (Urinbojev 2020), together with their rights to family and health care (Kashnitsky and Demintseva 2015), speak of the combination of informal strategies, strict bordering and the othering of immigrants through racialisation into individuals without rights and needs (Agadjanian, Menjívar and Zotova 2017; Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018).

The migration policies and statuses of different citizens have varied greatly since the collapse of the Soviet Union (e.g. Chudinovskikh and Denisenko 2017) and some immigrants have been living – undocumented – in the country ever since. The government has used immigrants in policymaking on national security, drawing on the rhetoric of existential threats to justify authoritarian actions to restrict individuals' capabilities, in which the Roma, Central Asians and Caucasians have been portrayed as 'undesirables', criminals and threats to the national economy (Bacon, Renz and Cooper 2006). Simultaneously, for geopolitical interests, a certain status

and Russian citizenship has been granted to people from unrecognised states in the former Soviet Union, such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Molodikova 2017).

The expressions ‘Russia for Russians’ and, later, ‘Russia for the Russians, Moscow for the Muscovites’, existed before the Soviet Union; however, starting from Putin’s presidency, racial prejudice has been mixed with anti-terrorist ideologies to justify the violence related to wars in nearby areas and in Moscow, with the state-governed media playing an important role in manufacturing ethnic prejudice (Avrutin 2022). The myth of the guilty ‘other’ emerges, framing immigrants as threats to the Russian people (Schenk 2018). Since 2012, the Russian State Duma has passed a string of repressive laws aimed at non-governmental organisations and individuals, including those supporting the rights of minorities.

Russia is one of the world’s most ethno-culturally diverse countries, where racial discrimination affects a considerable proportion of its citizens. The state has faced the challenge of how to unify, satisfy and control nationalistic ideologies in the crossfire of different interest groups. Populism has been used to strengthen President Putin’s authority in the multi-ethnic state by emphasising the role of citizenship (e.g. Burrett 2020). A heterogeneous group under the single heading of ‘illegal immigrants’ has been created and the largest nationalist organisations have focused on people without citizenship (Kolstø and Blakkisrud 2016). The concept, however, has been used in a targeted manner. At the turn of the millennium, with Russia at war with Chechnya and afterwards with Georgia, Caucasian appearance or family name alone was enough for a person to be referred to as illegal. The limited social stigmatisation of nearly 50,000 individuals – half of the world’s skinheads – as extreme-right and racist gang members narrows down the possibilities for peaceful coexistence (e.g. Kuznetsova and Round 2019; Zakharov 2015). The increase in racist crimes in the first decade of the twenty-first century made Russia one of the deadliest places in the world for minorities (Arnold 2016).

Since the undocumented immigrant needs to negotiate his/her capability to work and live informally between private individuals, the quantity and quality of these relations either enables or restricts these capabilities (e.g. Urinboev 2021). The exploitation of social, legal, political and economic possibilities is a sign of overall societal dysfunction when equality, values of belonging and limitations on membership in society are relevant to everybody (Anderson 2015). The experiences of long-term undocumented immigrants, living through several political periods in the same country, offer a new perspective on the role of ordinary citizens and their attitudes towards immigrants as an important factor shaping the amount and quality of capabilities.

The capabilities of undocumented immigrants

Nussbaum’s capability approach (2011) examines the well-being and flourishing of society through the actual capabilities of its individuals. The capability approach is mostly concerned with the end results, the outcomes equally present for the people. By concentrating on the end results, the methods by which to pursue the goal and the forms of implementation can differ (Nussbaum 2000, 2011). The condition for a dignified life nonetheless includes 10 minimum thresholds for capability, and the failure of our societies to provide and protect these thresholds increases inequality (Nussbaum 2011). According to Nussbaum (2000), the thresholds are (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity, (4) senses, imagination and thought, (5) emotions, (6) practical reasons, (7) affiliation, (8) other species, (9) play and (10) control over one’s environment, including political and material environments. Nussbaum’s framework is rooted in a normative philosophical concept of a fulfilling life and has faced criticism for presupposing that disadvantaged individuals lack the capacity for critical self-reflection regarding their own well-being (Arun 2022). Building on these critiques, I aim to underscore the capacity for the critical assessment and intentional adjustment of preferences within the confines of structural limitations, particularly among the long-term undocumented immigrants participating in my research.

Applying for asylum in Russia is most often pointless (Bloch 2022). Passports are issued when they serve the interests of the Russian state (Richey 2018). The changing policies of the Russian citizenship regime are not clearly articulated for the Russian population or for immigrants and amendments to the citizenship law have been adopted quickly without public discussion (Molodikova 2017). The ambiguity of the law and its administration are used by the state as a mode of governance, with formal and informal activities working simultaneously towards surprisingly coherent sets of goals (Schenk 2021). The line between formal and informal activities is sometimes hard to indicate, especially when the activities co-exist to such an extent that it is unclear whether a payment required is a fine or a bribe (Schenk 2021). Concurrently the average citizen does not necessarily confront these challenges but witnesses the message of active immigration control through state media (Schenk 2021).

Following the capability approach, no one should be treated as an agent to execute another's life plan but as a source of agency with his/her own life to live, deserving the support for capabilities in reciprocity with others (Nussbaum 2011). Nussbaum refers to people as citizens, concluding that every human being in the world is entitled to capabilities and that it is the duty of humanity to realise entitlements for everyone to enable them to rise above the minimum concerning capabilities (Nussbaum 2000, 2006). Regarding undocumented immigrants in Moscow, none of the capability thresholds are protected by the state. The informal networks and bribes, however, offer restricted and unstable capabilities. Questions regarding life, bodily health and integrity are necessities for survival and, as such, require the undocumented immigrant's capability to negotiate and to cooperate with citizens. The minimum capability thresholds regarding *emotions*, *affiliation* and *control over one's environment* are thus crucial for my study, since they embody the complex challenges of an undocumented immigrant in interaction with his or her surroundings (Nussbaum 2000).

From the chosen thresholds, emotions refer to the ability to have attachments to things and people, to love but also to grieve and to feel gratitude and justified anger, so that one's emotional development is not ruined by the overwhelming fear of and anxiety caused by traumatic events, abuse or neglect (Nussbaum 2000). In my study of traumatic events, I refer not only to the situations leading to migration but also to the level of perceived discrimination during the person's undocumented life, leading to symptoms of psychological distress (cf. Peña-Sullivan 2020). This distress has been found in studies to be especially severe for undocumented immigrants, raising significant clinical, political and societal questions (Herroudi, Knuppel and Blavier 2024). The threshold of *affiliation* means that a person can live with and for others, recognising and showing concerns for others by engaging in various forms of social interaction, having compassion for others and the capability for both justice and friendship, self-respect and equality, while society protects institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation (Nussbaum 2000). As a minimum, this affiliation means protection against discrimination based on race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, caste, ethnicity or national origin and the ability to work and exercise practical reasoning in mutual recognition of other workers (Nussbaum 2000). Of all the thresholds, *control over one's environment* protects one's ability to participate effectively in policies that govern one's life, having the right to political participation and a free voice. This threshold is also material, meaning that, as part of a person's control over his or her environment, he or she needs to be able to hold property, not just formally but in terms of real opportunity; because of this, the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others and to have freedom from unwarranted search and seizure is crucial (Nussbaum 2000).

Implementation of the study

Methods

I completed this multi-sited ethnographic research, including 2 week-long fieldwork periods in Moscow, in December 2017 and January 2020. Beyond the actual face-to-face fieldwork in Moscow, an online field was established through messengers, video calls and emails from December 2017 to February 2022. Altogether, my research data consisted of an observation diary from each field trip to Moscow and 150 pages of 15 ethnographic interviews, together with the recordings, phone calls, voice and chat messages received between and after the face-to-face fieldwork in Moscow. During the trips to Moscow, I stayed in 2 of the same apartments as the study participants (the first one was that of an acquaintance, which made it easier for me to reach the other participants). Further, 5 other undocumented immigrants lived close by – some of whom were elderly – and they came to meet me for the first time; we thus had our discussions separately in a small kitchen. I also visited 3 other study participants. Regarding the remaining participants, I talked with them in a car while following their daily activities. Russian was used as the common language in all communication.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the spread of the war in Ukraine prevented me from carrying out more extensive fieldwork in Moscow. Although online methods such as digital ethnographies or ‘netnographies’ are not a new phenomenon for the social sciences, some scholars, such as Marnie Howlett (2022), have underlined the need to see how they reshape our overall understanding of the fieldwork we undertake and the data which we collect. For my study, changes to the original research plan were made with limited alternatives. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to get to know all the participants face to face before the borders were closed. The online field functioned naturally, since the study participants had already maintained relations with their relatives in numerous locations for years. In the end, the physical and internet-based fields in my study formed a single, continuous entity, parallel and integrated with one another (Falzon 2016). The online field embodied the shared reality, perhaps in some cases even more realistically than it would have with my physical presence. With elderly people, however, the face-to-face discussion in kitchens and cars was irreplaceable and the online field would not have functioned without the trust created in our meetings in the very beginning. Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic and, later, the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022, only added content to my analysis, verifying the previous and recurring societal problems and political changes experienced by my study participants, which brought difficulties to the streets and to informal capabilities, first and foremost to already vulnerable minority groups.

Critical ethnography provided the philosophical foundation for my fieldwork, analysis and writing process (Gobo 2008). Critical ethnography is ethnography viewed through the lens of justice (Hagues 2021). The choices made between the concepts of ‘illegal immigrants’ and ‘undocumented immigrants’ have been approached as an indicator of researchers’ political positions (e.g. Callister, Galbraith and Carlile 2022). In my study, I hope to underline that the distinction between legal and illegal, formal and informal is far from straightforward, even more in countries where over-regulation and poor law enforcement occur side by side with informal operating models (Ledeneva 2011; Reeves 2013). Thus, I aim to disrupt the *status quo* and bring light to the obscure operations of power (Madison 2020). By listening to and analysing the more constrained, out-of-reach experiences of long-term undocumented immigrants, I wish to expand our overall understanding of the factors significant to those who are undocumented regarding their capabilities within the society. The study participants prompted me to proceed further with my findings, seeking the root cause of experienced inequity and those standing to benefit from it. ‘Let me tell you how things really work around here’ was a phrase repeated to me numerous times, usually continuing with a description of the existing power structures and their economic drivers. I am especially grateful for such comments because they reminded me of why I embarked

on this research project in the first place: to bring better awareness of the state policies and implementations affecting those above and beyond their mandate.

The critical ‘ethical radar’ has been prioritised at all stages of my research project due to the unpredictable political, legal and social agendas concerning migration and its governance (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2020). For this reason, my study did not identify the participants in any detail. Participation was voluntary and based on mutual trust. In the implementation, collection, processing and management of the research material, I have followed the guidelines on good scientific practice set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), which replicate international guidelines and provide advice for the overall ethical assessment (Keiski, Hämäläinen, Karhunen, Löfström, Näreaho, Varantola, Spoof, Tarkiainen, Kaila and Aittasalo 2023). As stated by TENK (2019), the principles for research provide clear guidance on ethical issues and function as a part of the self-regulation system for human sciences, where the final responsibility always rests with the researcher, including foresight when it comes to any form of potential harm that could be caused to the people participating in the research. An ethical pre-assessment by an ethics committee is carried out at the request of a researcher only in limited cases – e.g. when participants are minors without parental consent or when the research intervenes the physical integrity of research participants (TENK 2019). The informed consent for my research was requested from each of the participants after I described the topic and the goal of my research, the expected duration and the points related to the use of the research material. The possibility for participants to withdraw was given – and my contacts in the field stayed on to this day without withdrawing. The research material is not available to other participants in the study and has not been nor will not be shared after the research is completed. The recordings were deleted after their transcription, as were all the messages, shared via WhatsApp and Telegram, after all the data essential for the further analysis of some material was pseudonymised and saved on a university’s password-protected, secure disk. The participants themselves were responsible for deleting the shared information from their own devices. For security reasons, the fieldwork ended in the spring 2022 due to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Participants

I found the first study participants through personal contacts and then through snowball sampling. The 15 participants came from Caucasasia and Central Asia – both women and men, aged 23–70 years old, mostly with higher education (some with interrupted studies due to migration). The participants had lived undocumented for more than 10 years in Moscow. A few of them had spent their entire childhood and youth undocumented. The middle-aged ones had fled war and hunger and went to Moscow as young adults with Soviet passports. One had been a refugee for 20 years but had been in Moscow for only a week at the time of our first meeting. The participants worked mostly in the food industry. Approximately half of the participants, after living for up to 15 years without documents in Moscow, now possessed Russian citizenship. The rest of the participants were still, after more than 20 years, without residence permits. The experiences of life without – and later with – citizenship were valuable for understanding the experiences of immigrants as a whole and the special vulnerability of undocumented immigrants.

The capabilities of emotions and affiliation

Martha Nussbaum’s capability approach underlines the need for a dignified human life in which one has the capability to pursue one’s own conception of the good in cooperation with others (Nussbaum 2000). Most of the participants had arrived in Moscow as refugees during the turbulent years following the collapse of the Soviet Union – having lost homes, family members, income and homeland with a shared future. Some of the

Caucasian participants had tried to return home and rebuild everything again only to see it get burned down once more. As described by one participant, ‘What we had, our home, it’s destroyed and no longer exists, when we get old and die, we can dream of getting buried there, that’s all there is left’. Moscow was chosen as a destination because, for most of the participants, it was the only direction open and, as the previous capital of the Soviet Union, offered possibilities for income as well as special medical care that was no longer available in their recently destroyed home towns. The first years in Moscow, right after the collapse of the Soviet Union, at the beginning of the 1990s, were pictured as scary, with hunger, fear and little hope of returning home. The capability of emotions (Nussbaum 2000) could not be met, as the participants did not have the opportunity to demonstrate justified anger – and the feeling of overwhelming fear and anxiety was still present. During the first years of undocumented stay, however, the situation was said to be difficult for everyone and the immigration policies were not foremost in the locals’ minds, which facilitated the establishment of those informal networks which were essential for everyone’s capabilities and survival.

After the first turbulent years of the 1990s, the issue of citizenship became more real and started to influence the means of negotiating with locals for housing, children’s schooling and health care. The overall dissatisfaction of people, mixed with the competition over livelihood and right-wing populism in state-governed media, slowly and steadily grew into more systematic forms of racism, as experienced by the participants. The bitter experiences of hate that any foreign-looking individual could face grew steadily following the wars in Chechnya. The thresholds for emotions and for affiliation (Nussbaum 2000) could not be met when the media presented an image of Caucasians as criminals, terrorists and drug dealers, in favour of Vladimir Putin’s strong administration, normalising the demonisation of immigrants (e.g. Russell 2005). Society did not protect institutions constituting and nourishing forms of affiliation and immigrants were not protected against discrimination based on race, ethnicity or national origin (Nussbaum 2000). Long-term friendships with the locals were suddenly caught in the crossfire of the population’s growing dissatisfaction with living conditions and right-wing populist discourses in the public media. The situation of rising nationalism was later repeated with the Russo–Georgian War in 2008, as told by one of the participants, originally from Abkhazia, Georgia. I followed him to the market where he helped his senior (undocumented) relatives sell homemade gravies. As the seniors got out of the car, he explained how some of the older people still remembered the prior friendship between Georgians and Russians. Public rhetoric, however, changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of an openly nationalistic agenda.

It is impossible to try to convince those who do not understand anything else. We wait for 5, 6 or maybe 10 years. Only when they negotiate again with our [Georgian] politicians with results more pleasing to them will they also on TV declare that we are brothers. It is not possible for us to try to convince [anyone of] something else in between.

As he stated, ‘It’s all politics more than a citizenship issue. It was said on TV that Georgians were bad. The youth believed [it]. Younger citizens without personal ties and positive memories were easily manipulated by the racist message’. Later in the evening, the same participant told me that, during the years of international conflict, he was afraid to walk in the streets. This was not only because of the fear of officials but because the amount of money which he was expected to pay to locals who had become suddenly interested in an additional income at the expense of ‘those illegal immigrants’ was getting so high that many in his situation needed to steal to provide it. One of the younger undocumented immigrants stated, ‘Without documents, you need to be ready to pay for everything and [money] to everyone for your existence’. Besides collecting bribes, expectations for transactional favours increased, while threats and blackmailing rose and lists of foreign school children were given to immigration officers to trigger the deportation of entire families. One of the

undocumented adult participants, who lived his whole childhood as undocumented, was suddenly accused by his local friend of ‘stealing income from the Russian people’. As he stated, ‘On any given day, you needed to be ready to be blamed for something wrong in the lives of the majority population, even though you were just existing with the restricted capabilities available to you’.

According to the participants, most of the population over the age of 35 still believed that national television was the most reliable source of information. This makes it challenging for ordinary citizens to turn to alternative media sources (Gehlbach, Lokot and Shirikov 2022). A participant interested in Russian language and communication stated that she had actively followed local news and estimated that less than 1 per cent of the content discussed issues related to immigration without political biases. Another middle-aged participant summed up her experiences of and feelings about the issue: ‘Without documents, you are a zero here’. The state-aligned media created a picture of ‘illegals’ without social rights, providing justification for anyone to blame and benefit from the subordinate status of the undocumented immigrants, creating a direct capability failure for an affiliation on a societal level. The capability to have concerns for other human beings, to have compassion and to seek justice and friendship is based on the idea of reciprocity, the failure of which affects not only the capabilities of the undocumented immigrants but the whole society.

None of my study participants had contact with organisations which could have raised the issue of immigration policies in public debate. Only one of my participants, originally from Abkhazia, remembered an agency that had taken care of refugees’ affairs by handing out refugee cards. Ironically, those cards served only as evidence of an ‘illegal stay’ for the police. Participants experienced the stigma of being illegal in their increased need to work with worsened working conditions, to pay more penalties and bribes not only to state officials but to anyone in need of extra income in institutions and on the streets, as well as within the private sector. Based on my observations, no serious attempt has been made to change the system, whereas the number of immigrants has increased (e.g. Schenk 2018).

Talking with study participants helped me to understand the temporal difference between being undocumented during the chaotic years following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s and today, when formal and less-formal practices, such as service fees, work opportunities, fines and bribes, are more systematically managed both at a higher level and online. After all these years, most of the participants felt that they already knew how and where to get things done. They had also become more transparent, in contradiction with new minority groups. Thus, after two decades of undocumented stay, constant fear was not as present as before. The years of fear, however, left the participants sick, in their own words. As repeated to me on many occasions, ‘Only such a person, who has lived here like me, for years, being afraid of everyone and everything and having nothing, will know what it has done to me’. The fifth capability – emotions – is crucial if individuals are to feel attached to their surroundings (Nussbaum 2000). This means the capability to have feelings such as love and grief, gratitude and longing as well as justified anger, where one’s emotional development is not overwhelmed by fear and anxiety, traumatic events of abuse or neglect (Nussbaum 2000). As my fieldwork has shown, the pre-migration events had caused physical suffering and states of fear and the stress concerning migrants’ undocumented status only further exacerbated the traumatic experiences.

The subordinate status of undocumented immigrants makes them an easy target for anyone wishing to benefit from social inequity. The state, besides failing to protect the capability of undocumented immigrants to govern their own lives, further narrows down their capabilities by representing different immigrant groups as, more or less, ‘others’ (Abashin 2016), simultaneously approving the exploitation on the streets. The bribery practices are well-developed and partly standardised, bringing bread to the table not only to officials but to private individuals as well. One young participant narrated how the authorities, failing to find a way to benefit themselves, look away or ‘laugh out loud’ when the undocumented report thefts. Unpaid wages, an accident at work or any other ill treatment leading to disability or death belonged to the same category, where filing a report

only worsened the situation of the undocumented individuals and families. One of the participants, who currently works in a cafeteria further from the city centre, had previously worked in managerial positions, albeit undocumented. She stated, 'I can deal with the racists – a few of whom had even collaborated with me – but I cannot change the fact that, when I am found to be a competitor or threat, anyone can expose me and my family to the officials'. I heard the same frustration in the voice of a young adult participant whose family had moved to Moscow from Central Asia when he was just a child. He took a deep breath, explaining how the nationalists were not the biggest concern to him but rather the governance and state-aligned media, keeping people repeatedly reluctant to face ever-growing inequality. These experiences show how the threshold of affiliation (Nussbaum 2000), being able to work and exercise practical reasoning in mutual recognition with others, is not only left unrealised but is also used against undocumented immigrants. Besides support from friends and relatives, their entire survival was based on cyclically changing capabilities outsourced to informal networks without possibilities of appeal. The capability to attach to society is thus conditional and, first and foremost, is not protected from the whims of the markets and power politics (Nussbaum 2011).

As capability theory emphasises an individual's well-being in reciprocity, it would be misleading to comprehend capability failures as affecting only minorities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, 4 of the study participants became seriously ill. Participants noticed that people, regardless of their citizenship status, came to work visibly sick rather than risk a loss of income. Simultaneously, the national TV channels and newspapers showed the police deporting foreigners who were not complying with the quarantine requirements (e.g. *MBK-News* 2020; *The Insider* 2020). The attention shifted again from inadequate social security and healthcare to the 'others'. This represented an example of societal challenges, where public health measures were compromised in a bid to enhance state power (e.g. Lamberova and Sonin 2022). The second epidemic wave raised some public criticism. One of the participants had just spent more than 20 hours waiting for an ambulance for her (undocumented) grandmother. With a cold voice, she stated, 'In the face of this disease, we are all alone with our money and connections – documents or not, nobody cares, as long as you have money; that's just too obvious to everyone'.

The capability of political and material control

As experienced by the participants, the challenges of obtaining a residence permit and having the capability to act differed from the reality presented in public speeches. Residence and work-permit practices were burdensome, expensive and difficult to implement in practice and, as told by the participants, can also hinder the possibilities to live in Russia. The country's Refugee Law is not implemented properly and the state denies asylum to most refugees (e.g. Lyapina 2021). Simultaneously, while living with the participants, I witnessed how routinely an undocumented refugee – with just one phone call – obtained a low-paid job in grey markets as a cleaner, kitchen worker, construction worker or servant, a bit further out from the city centre, without the endless bureaucracy. The informal practices generated capabilities alongside the official policies that denied them. Moscow is an expensive city to live in, so those who work within this framework sleep on couches, just as one participant did, sharing her room with me during my field work and sending money to relatives back at home. Such a life is about working hard for your family's survival and being ready to lose it all at any given moment. Helping other family members, as stated by the participants, gave life a meaning, with very little freedom of choice and personal fulfilment.

In addition to immigrants from Caucasia and Central Asia – as refugees and/or undocumented work forces – the plight of immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus was striking. The East Slavic immigrants were creating increased wage competition in already low-paid occupational groups and some of the undocumented participants narrated how the newcomers had a negative effect on their position and salary. The participants

easily recognised the repetitive forms of exploitation and the reasons behind the selective immigration policy, affecting overall capabilities differently depending on the country of origin. As described by one of the participants, ‘Many benefit from you being undocumented here’. These examples embody the repetition of simultaneous capability failures on multiple levels, as the ideas of reciprocity and affiliation are misused (Nussbaum 2000). From the perspective of control over one’s environment, the participants have no possibilities to participate in policies to govern their own life or close environment, their employment is not realised on an equal basis with others and there is no protection from unwarranted search and seizure processes (Nussbaum 2000).

Regarding undocumented immigrants from one of the so-called Russian colonies – that is, former parts of the Soviet Union (Koplatadze 2019) – the individuals remain under the rule of Russian governance. Their choices are made with narrowed-down capabilities between limited options. According to the participants in this study, the state used them as hostages to practice political extortion. Some of the participants had originally tried to apply for refugee status but were told to accuse their home country of oppression and to apply for political asylum. They explained to me how they could not do this, since it was not the case and they wished to return home after the war. Therefore, they stayed undocumented in the country as they awaited peace, until the outbreak of new Russian hostilities with Georgia in 2008 and the growing number of street-level aggressions in Moscow, fed by the state media blaming ‘illegal immigrants’ for organised crime. This made any form of safe existence in the country impossible for undocumented immigrants. Simultaneously, Russian passports were distributed to people as the only option besides growing violence, oppression and deportation. One participant reflected on his dilemma of dreaming of returning home but being forced to choose between lost hopes and safety reasons.

We are redundant there now, too. Everything you and your family have had is destroyed. Your rights are trampled, no matter what you do; you are a second-class citizen there as well but also unemployed. There are no prospects for you or your children and you are lying to yourself, just to find some peace of mind, if you try to think any other way.

The Russian state maintains a system of exploitation that serves its geopolitical interests and transborder nationalism, with direct presidential control of migration flows (e.g. Kuznetsova 2020). The well-advertised, forced deportations in the name of ‘national security’ had taken place repeatedly, both before and during elections and conflicts with neighbouring countries. As experienced by the participants, the grounds for the sudden deportations did not match the public reasoning of ‘fight against illegal crime’, as the unwarranted search and seizure happened mostly during the conflicts of interest between neighbouring countries.

‘It’s not the people, it’s the politics’ is a popular saying in Russia, one repeated to me often when the participants described the reality of the advantages which undocumented immigrants represent for the state and how it defines their human value. The desire to keep an undocumented immigrant in the country needs to be greater than the interest of deportation. To the study participants, the question of international politics concerned ownership in the distribution of funds and resources across the borders of former Soviet states. These negotiations were held far away from ordinary people, citizens or undocumented immigrants. From the perspective of the study participants, the interests behind politics were never about the country and its people. According to one of the participants, who has had Russian citizenship now for a few years after living as an undocumented immigrant, ‘In politics only money matters, in Moscow at least, it’s all about money, it is not about the people’. The study participants had been undocumented for years; thus, they had built their lives by considering the uncertainty of political interests and the potential consequences of such interests for their everyday lives. Undocumented immigrants do not have capabilities concerning control over their environment,

since they are manipulated in administrative procedures and on the streets, where the struggle for survival takes place.

In one of our kitchen discussions, a senior participant questioned the reason for my research: ‘Why do you want to discuss these old matters. It is just politics; people are the same everywhere. I am already old. No one can change what happened to us. Someone needed this to be like this, and that’s it’. Before I could answer, a middle-aged man answered, ‘Friend, have you forgotten how we ran from the police, climbed up a tree, how they took our salary, [how] we returned home empty-handed? Do you think they stopped with us?’ As a few of the participants mentioned, the same tactics were now being used to stigmatise and ease the exploitation of new immigrant groups on the streets: ‘What they did to us they will do with the other newcomers. We will compete [to act in society] with a growing number of suffering people around us’.

Conclusions and discussion

The issues of immigration legislation, bureaucracy and the grey economy, together with widespread corruption as part of public activities affecting the possibilities of undocumented immigrants within society, have been discussed earlier (e.g. Kaushal 2019; Kubal 2019; Schenk 2013, 2018, 2021). Concentrating on the experiences of long-term undocumented immigrants in Moscow, my study examines how the everyday capabilities of undocumented immigrants are produced and realised through informal contacts, in cooperation with private individuals and networks. This cooperation is often transactional, conditional and susceptible to cyclical, political influence. The study concludes that the lack of citizenship and working permits are administrative factors enabling the exploitation of the undocumented immigrant not only by the representatives of institutional decision-making bodies but also by anyone outside the institutions. As such, this study confirms that the socio-legal context of the undocumented status enables informal exploitation side by side with the well-studied institutional operating models. This connection is manifested in years of experience of restricted capabilities concerning affiliation, emotions and control of one’s environment in a synchronous, cyclical relation between formal and informal practices. The versatile forms of failure among society’s members concerning affiliation and emotions, together with a lack of control over one’s environment, are experienced by long-term undocumented immigrants as following and, in the end, serving the overall goals of formal immigration policy.

None of the capability thresholds (Nussbaum 2000) are supported by society in a trustworthy manner and they are all dependent on changing external factors, over which the undocumented immigrant has very little influence. The lack of attention to structural factors acts as a breeding ground for inequality and further exploitation, preventing the tackling of systematic social failures. Dealing with the issue of ‘illegal immigrants’ has become part of the public agenda, a problem for the nation to solve, while the social challenges and political conflicts between the country and its neighbouring countries keep bringing immigrants to Moscow, which benefits from the stock of cheap labour and the multidimensional dependence of neighbouring countries. Simultaneously, the ramifications of strict, expensive and discriminatory migration policies support the emergence and development of informal practices within and outside state agencies, offering minimum thresholds for capabilities with unequal and unstable terms – familiar to long-term undocumented immigrants. Rather than directing critique at the decision-making bodies responsible for the complex societal challenges, the criticism repeatedly hits those with restricted capabilities. The length of the undocumented stay, the fixed forms of bribery and the collapse of civil society, together with the silencing of the independent media, all underscore the expediently maintained oppression.

The question of reciprocity is essential when considering the thresholds for capabilities in a society with experiences of growing inequity. Martha Nussbaum (2000) states that no one should be treated as a commodity to serve economic or political needs, since each individual should be seen as a valuable part of society with


indivisible human dignity. In the case of undocumented immigrants, the official and unofficial operating models are, nevertheless, foremostly aimed at political and economic gains. According to my study participants, average citizens were viewed partly as a tool with which to justify and support the policies, brazenly trampling on human rights. The participants spoke in detail about the repetition and overall growth in the number of people being oppressed year by year, with the help of state-aligned media – experienced as a particularly frustrating pattern manifested on the institutional level and on the streets during international conflicts and elections. My study, however, relies on ethnographic observations and discussions conducted solely from the perspective of immigrant participants’ experiences of capabilities; thus, the results reported in my study regarding the possible awareness and perspectives of others should be considered in the light of some limitations.

Following the expansion of war in Ukraine in 2022, Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe and is, overall, distancing itself from international human-rights norms and structures. Prior studies have raised extensive concerns regarding the political and economic cooperation of so-called Western countries with Russian state representatives. Simultaneously, as mentioned already, the politicisation of undocumented migration in Russia does find parallels with democratic Western policies (Schenk 2021). The realisation of capabilities is an obligation binding all societies, even if the methods of implementation differ. The capability approach has allowed the distinguishing of the institutional means from their outcomes and the experienced capabilities from the public declarations. The experiences of cyclical repetition and the development of informal models over the years show the expediency of the practice. As such, this study offers analytical tools with which to locate growing, discriminatory policies in different societies regardless of any regional forms of implementation.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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