**Borders and bureaucracies of EU Mobile Citizenship: Polish migrants and the Personal Identification Number in Sweden**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article advances research into the workings and ‘workarounds’ of internal border technologies in migrants’ lives. Through a focus on the specific example of tensions between EU mobile citizenship and the Swedish personal identification number, or *personnummer,* we enhance understandings of the bureaucratisation of state power and the enduring importance of discretion in computerised bureaucratic encounters. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Polish migrants living in Sweden, we analyse the centrality of this *personnummer* to our participants’ working lives and general access to daily amenities and services. We reveal how and why it is so difficult to get this registration, even as EU citizens; explore how this relates to exploitative work practices; consider what happens, or cannot happen, when people are unable to obtain their *personnummer* and are effectively rendered undocumented; and focus on how these bureaucratic exclusions can nevertheless be managed and mediated. Ultimately we find that while this one example presents significant insights into the specificities of Swedish bordering practices – which go well beyond prevailing interests in welfare bordering – it also offers new insights into how contemporary digitised personal identification bureaucracies work in practice, and how fragile mobile EU citizenship has become.

**KEY WORDS**

Polish migrants, Sweden, personnummer, bureaucracy, borders, mobile EU citizenship

**INTRODUCTION: EU Mobile Citizenship and Digitised Everyday Borders in Sweden**

This article investigates the limits of EU mobile citizenship in our age of computerised borders. Taking the lens of everyday bureaucracy, we illuminate the kinds of exclusions EU citizens face when they move within the EU bloc, considering both the damage these marginalisations inflict, but also the possibilities there are to usurp them. This paper thus contributes new knowledge about the ongoing conditionalities and strategies of EU mobile citizenship specifically, while also extending timely and burgeoning discussions about how digitised borders – and especially internal, everyday ones – are encountered, enacted and challenged.

Our case-study focus here is the experiences of Polish migrants living and working in Sweden. We feel this example highlights perfectly the tensions which exist between EU freedom of movement, the boundaries of state governance, and wider accelerations in the digitisation of data and border management. On the one hand, these are lives which embody the tenets and freedoms of mobile EU citizenship through migration. On the other, the difficulties which Poles in Sweden have been facing when dealing with the ‘everyday state’, which we explore here, highlight the kinds of exclusions and precarities mobile EU citizens have been enduring across the bloc at least since EU enlargement in 2004.

Although EU citizenship and mobility is differentially governed across member states, there is a common logic of *conditionality* at the heart of the freedom of movement framework which is shaping the experiences of EU migrants as they move and settle (Bruzelius, 2019; Lafleur & Mescoli, 2018). Increasingly, for example, the ‘no recourse to public funds’ clause requiring people to be economically self-sufficient, embedded in the freedom of movement treatise, is leaving many mobile EU citizens ‘responsiblised for their own risk’ (Heindlmaier & Blauberger, 2017). EU migrants can find themselves barred from welfare assistance, and as a result, more likely to be vulnerable to exploitation at work, and even, in more extreme situations, at risk of deportation (Burrell & Schweyher, 2019). As a quintessential universal welfare state, with high levels of support for citizens, Sweden is generally credited with offering relatively generous benefits for migrants, and is certainly portrayed as one of the more inclusive regimes for migration and welfare (Sainsbury, 2012: 94). There is ample evidence, however, to suggest that EU migrants have not been presented with a welcoming, inclusive, comprehensible regime on arrival (Bruzelius, 2019).

Our article focuses on the internal border technologies of the *personnummer*,the personal identification number which is at the heart of the envisioned contract between Swedish state and society, and is thus the key to inclusive citizenship in the country (Sigvardsdotter, 2012). Research has increasingly demonstrated that getting this *personnummer* has not been straightforward for EU migrants (Hyltén-Cavallius, 2018; Spehar et al., 2017; Bruzelius, 2019). Central here is a fundamental temporal and territorial tension. On the one hand there are the temporalities of the freedom of movement framework, which allow EU citizens to live abroad freely for *up to three months* (and stay thereafter if seeking work, with ‘sufficient funds’ to be self-supported, or have a family member in work or with such funds). On the other is Sweden’s use of habitual residence tests for the purpose of registering new arrivals, asking people for proof of *at least one year’s planned residence*, with this being the key to acquiring a *personnummer*, and with it access to Swedish life. There is a direct clash here between territorially conceived citizenship and cross border mobility (Hyltén-Cavallius, 2018; Bruzelius, 2019). Spehar et al. (2017: 119) highlight how the requirement for a *personnummer* creates a catch-22 situation for EU migrants, as employers are far more likely to offer work to somebody who is already registered. If you arrive in Sweden expecting to exercise freedom of movement rights, without a pre-confirmed job offer, you can end up in a situation where you can’t get a *personnummer* without a job, but you can’t get a job without a *personnummer* (Hyltén-Cavallius, 2018: 134; Fröhlig et al., 2019). As we will show in this paper, the problems and exclusions this situation creates go far beyond concerns about welfare bordering (restricting access to welfare) which tends to attract the most interest in the academic literature about Nordic immigration regimes (Barker, 2017b). The *personnummer* system manifests as a much more fundamental obstacle to functioning, and by extension, belonging, in Sweden than is usually acknowledged (Sigvardsdotter, 2012).

In this article, we ask how this specific identification technology manifests in the everyday lives of Poles in Sweden. We explore the wider problems it causes, but also how it is managed and what possibilities there are to disrupt it. We think especially about the wider networks and encounters which exist around this bureaucracy, who ‘helps’ with these processes, and what room there is for discretion in decision making, even in this computerised system. We find that this particular case-study reveals important insights into the implementation and navigation of computerised internal border systems more broadly, as well offering a clear indictment of the fragility of the EU freedom of movement promise.

We now turn to a consideration of some of the debates surrounding migration, bureaucracy and borders, and then, because the ‘know-where’ of bureaucracy is so important (Kuus, 2020: 124), a more in-depth exploration of the Swedish context in terms of immigration and welfare governance, along with a discussion of the methods and research we have undertaken there. Finally, we draw on our in-depth interviews with Polish migrants living and working around the Malmӧ area of Sweden to concentrate on these lived experiences and subjectivities of this of bordering bureaucracy, and the exclusions and loopholes it presents.

**BUREAUCRACY, BORDERS AND MIGRATION**

Theoretically, this paper is interested in the kinds of relationship migrants have with the state. Of course, there are two generalisations within this interest straight away – the category ‘migrants’ covers people in a whole range of situations and positionalities, and the notion of ‘the state’ has consistently and convincingly been argued as something which is less monolithic structure, and rather something, as Gupta (2012: 45) suggests, better understood as ‘disaggregated’, always in the plural, and imagined (Miller & Rose, 2008: 65; Dean, 2010: 37; Gill, 2010). However, taking these caveats seriously suggests that there is something interesting and important in exploring the interfaces which exist between those governing and those being governed – interfaces which carry especially high stakes for people whose citizenship may be open to question. Arguably, the standout interface here is the ‘routines of bureaucracy’ which operationalise government regimes (Dean, 2010: 37). It is these rules, practices and the officials administering them which become present and palpable in people’s lives, at different times and in different spaces. As Kuus (2020: 119) asserts, ‘Modern power is bureaucratized power’. For Weber (2006: 58), the growth of state bureaucracy signalled the maturity of the rational, capitalist state, dehumanising the governed/governor relationship and ‘eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation’. Gupta (2012) illustrates the importance of bureaucratic processes for state building, giving the state the opportunity to ‘write itself’ through the plethora of forms and accounts which are inscribed through bureaucratic encounters. More studies are now emphasising, with understandable urgency, the increasingly digitised nature of these bureaucracies, with citizenship becoming enmeshed in the politics and dynamics of mass computerised data systems which harden lines of inclusion and exclusion. This is especially pronounced in biometric identification systems, as Rao and Vijayanka (2019) demonstrate in India. Taking a wider perspective, Scheel et. al (2019) skewer the ontologically fundamental role that data has for managing and governing migration, arguing that we now need to embrace the ‘analysis of data practices [themselves] as objects of research’. Amoore (2018) is similarly persuasive in arguing that the amassing and handling of big data is a new frontier in state diplomacy and geopolitics.

While this bureaucracy – digitised or not – may appear to be a rather fixed backbone of the state, a consensus has been reached, moving beyond Weber’s dualism, that these interfaces are relational and affective. As Mitchell (2006: 174-6) points out, there is no meaningful binary between state and society. Painter (2006: 754) has been especially influential in these debates, theorising the everyday ‘prosaics’ of state practices and the ‘statization of the everyday’ in order to ‘undermine the separate spheres assumption by disrupting the binary logic of state/non-state formulations’. The thoughtful anthropological literature on ‘street-level’ bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2014; Zacka, 2017) further underlines this, demonstrating not only how even standardised processes can be implemented differently, but how fundamental discretion, and power, are in these practices. As Chambers (2020: 16-17) shows in his work in India, even the move to a digitised state does not remove the possibilities for ‘low-level political actors’ to ‘find new means through which to legitimate their authority’, and neither do these new computerised structures sit outside of local power norms and networks. By a similar logic, Sheldrick (2021), researching the impact of the move to the Universal Credit welfare system in the UK, finds that the bureaucratic encounter is simply changed – refocused on the computer screen, but not lost. Likewise, Kalman (2015) demonstrates the discretion border guards in Canada still have in framing the tone of interpersonal interactions, whatever the computer says. The ‘back office statisticians’ may be the ones exercising ‘socio-technical discretion’ in *making* the rules (Ustek-Spilda, 2020), but the everyday bureaucrats still have a role to play.

As our research will shortly reveal, these bureaucratic encounters are heavy with both meaning and consequence. For those being ‘managed’, these, largely mundane, office spaces and the interpersonal exchanges which take place within them come to represent broader understandings and imaginations of, as well as trust in, state and government (Gupta, 2012; 58, 72, 81-2.) It is not just what decisions are made, but ‘how one is treated’ within these encounters which matters (Zacka, 2017:9). Lipsky (2010: 59) notes how ‘clients’ are socially constructed, processed into certain categories to fit into ‘specific bureaucratic slots’. The ‘moral disposition’ (Zacka, 2017: 15, 25) of the officials further shapes the bureaucratic encounter. Both this process and exchange are embedded in, and co-constitutive of, the ‘diffuse moral assumptions of dominant social orientations’ (Lipsky, 2010: 109). Both are contingent and conditional, creating and perpetuating the contemporary allocation of insider and outsider status, inscribing and re-inscribing ‘us and them’ (Anderson, 2013), especially along intersectional gendered race and class lines; strivers and scroungers (Valentine & Harris, 2014), good immigrants and undeserving foreigners (Fassin, 2011: 212; De Genova, 2002: 438; Humphris, 2019). It is no surprise that the growing volume of work focusing on the ‘penal state’ (Peck, 2003) and the hardening of the welfare state, with its intersections of austerity, privatisation and everyday bureaucrats, has been drawing on these kinds of arguments (May et al., 2019; Humphris, 2019; Clayton et al., 2015).

This focus on affective, discrete bureaucracy dovetails well with the theoretically cognate interest in everyday, rescaled, internalised borders and the ‘multiple local actors’ operating ‘within the state's territory' to police them (Johnson & Jones, 2016: 5; Burridge et al., 2017: 243; Yuval-Davies, 2018: 230). Within EU states, Tervonen et al. (2018: 139) note a ‘proliferation of internal everyday bordering practices, taking place at the level of health care and bank reception counters, homeless shelters, workplaces, schools, local police stations and so on’, partly as a response to legislation protecting migrants from deportation, erecting strong internal borders where the external ones seem lacking. Note here how these are public *and* private spaces – the border has extended beyond the state, outsourced to the private realm. So, migrants may not be legally ejected from the territory, but they can be excluded from the polity, the welfare state (Burrell & Schweyher, 2019), and private and voluntary sector provisions too (Humphris, 2019). And as Zacka and Lipsky illustrate, it is the *discretion* – knowledge, worldview, prejudice, moral disposition – of these new local, state or outsourced, street level actors which will determine exactly what this bordering looks like, and who will feel it the most.

The flipside of so much discretion within bureaucratic systems, of course, is that there is always an element of flexibility within decision making. While high levels of discretion can clearly work to reinforce institutionalised prejudice, Tronto (1994: 117) reminds us that moral disposition can work in different ways; it is important to acknowledge that there will be times when a street level bureaucrat’s moral compass opens up the possibility for positive, careful, encounters too (Clayton et al., 2015). Tuckett’s (2015: 144) work with migrants navigating Italian bureaucracy also shows that there are usually workarounds in any system if you know where to find them and how to mobilise them. Scheel (2013: 280-1) argues how even when the restrictive nature of border control is intensified through its digitisation, some people will still be able to transgress them through clandestinely ‘successful appropriations of mobility’. However, although a ‘state’s indeterminacies can be productive’ (Tuckett, 2015: 126), they are not productive for everybody. To learn these ‘real’ rules, Tuckett’s participants had to have resources and contacts. Not everybody can recognise and operationalise such ‘counter tactics’ (Burridge et al., 2017: 244-5). Racial, gendered, social, cultural, economic capital – these all still matter in these embodied, material and situated (Scheel, 2013: 283) bureaucratic encounters. As we will see, these arguments profoundly resonate with what Poles in Sweden have been experiencing.

**GOVERNANCE AND BUREAUCRACY IN SWEDEN**

We believe that Sweden presents an important case-study for explorations into everyday governance and bureaucracy. The development of the Swedish bureaucratic state was, in a Weberian manner, closely linked to ‘a strong universalist ideology of scientific rationality’ and a growing sense of trust in the ‘government to steer policy rationally and in the best interest of the population’ (Cool, 2016: 282, 283). Rothstein (1998) notes how by 1870 a widespread bureaucratic regime was in place, ready, especially, to count and categorise the population – a precursor to the postwar *personnummer* registration system. This relationship between trust and a strong and universalist state has become one of the hallmark characteristics of depictions of Sweden, even now (Sigvardsdotter, 2012:71). These links between state, data and the population have led scholars such as Paulsson (2016) to draw on Foucauldian analyses to make sense of the biopolitics at the heart of Swedish state apparatus, as the population became increasingly positioned as a political problem to be regulated (Foucault, 2007: 245). Specifically, population categorisation in Sweden has been closely associated with highly racialised and classed bureaucratic technologies and a pervasive early twentieth century eugenics movement, centred around the establishment of the Swedish Institute for Racial Biology in 1922, focused on ‘improving’, and ‘protecting’, the population (Axelsson & Wisselgren, 2016: 79; Kjellman, 2013; Hubinette & Lundström, 2014). Garner (2014: 413) notes resonance in Foucault’s theorisations on ‘race war’ and Swedish state attempts to protect national populations – and especially the welfare system (Barker, 2017b) – from foreign ‘threats’. These processes and technologies helped to elevate a very specific, exclusive Nordic whiteness as the supreme identity (Rogers & Nelson, 2003; Kjellman, 2013), a legacy which is not just historical, but palpable throughout contemporary Sweden too (Hübinette, 2012; Sager, 2018).

This is the context in which the prohibitions surrounding the *personnummer* system need to be understood. Allocated at birth, or when formally registered if migrating in, it was first introduced in 1947, establishing a ‘uniform number for universal personal identification’, managing the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Paulsson, 2016: 80), with the 12 digit number denoting a person’s gender, along with when, and even where, they were born. Paulsson (2016: 80-1) sees this as a Foucauldian ‘tacit technology’, exemplifying the connections established between ‘administrative technology and bureaucratic knowledge in welfare states’. In the postwar era, it was the *personnummer* which ‘effectively turned individuals into legal persons’, elevating the legibility of the population further, turning it into a ‘describable body’ (Paulsson, 2016: 93; 82). The now computerised *personnummer* system allows – *or prohibits* – access to everyday life in Sweden, public and private – not just welfare assistance, but also work contracts, education, bank accounts, housing, gym memberships, retail accounts, library cards, parcel collection, car rental – this list is not exhaustive (Paulsson, 2016: 81; Hyltén-Cavallius, 2018: 129).

Having spent decades counting and sorting different populations in hierarchical ways, Swedish identification technologies are now enforcing the bordering of undocumented residents, but this time rendering certain migrants illegible, or invisible (Sager, 2018), rather than enumerating them. Arguably the *personnumme*r – a prime example of the kind of divisive ‘calculative thinking’ inherent in the ‘political management of space’ identified by Crampton and Elden (2006: 283) – has become a stark case-study of exclusionary state bureaucracy in action. This is not just about ‘walling the welfare state’ (Barker, 2017b), but presents a more holistic internal exclusion. As Sigvardsdotter (2013: 525) argues, life for people who don’t have the number is especially tough: ‘The efficiency of the inclusion of those who are ‘in’ equals the exclusion of those who are ‘out’ and the marked difference between those two positions makes Sweden, perhaps unexpectedly, an unusually harsh place to live off the grid’. For undocumented migrants, the *personnummer* works as a very effective internal bordering tool, rendering a whole series of places where a *personnummer* needs to be checked off limits, and with it a stream of everyday activities too frightening to contemplate (Khosvari, 2010).

It is, however, also an example of the enduring significance of discretion and encounter in bureaucratic mechanisms. If we consider Lipsky’s ideas about street level bureaucrats, it is the everyday nature of the *personnummer* which really stands out. The people who are entrusted to police it are those who work in libraries, health centres, shops, gyms, banks; enforcing the *personnummer* system is therefore a significant part of ordinary workplace practices, resting on ‘ordinary workers’’ capabilities, interpretations and decisions. As Sigvardsdotter (2012: 77-8) illustrates, for example, with widespread administrative computerisation it has ‘become technically impossible for a receptionist or cashier to serve a person who cannot produce an ID-number, or for a doctor to create a medical recording in their name’ – a point which underlines how solidly digitised these internal borders have become. She further notes how these same staff worry about ‘doing something wrong’ if they register somebody who does not have a *personnummer*, left to themselves, with their judgement, to manage who has access to facilities and services. Even if ultimately the ‘computer says no’ (Kalman, 2015), it is through these interactions that this internal border is ‘brought into being’ (Scheel, 2013: 285).

Fröhlig et al. (2019) and Spehar et al. (2017) explore what this means for those relying on these decisions, specifically noting the ambiguities and variabilities that EU citizens have been facing. First, in their research with Estonian nationals, Fröhlig et al. (2019: 189) found huge variations in the time people had to wait for decisions on the *personnummer*, as well as general experiences of ‘difficulties related to non-transparencywithin the Swedish system’. Similarly, Spehar et al. (2017) assert that while temporary coordination numbers can, in theory, be issued for short-term workers in place of a *personnummer* (but are more usually issued to foreign home owners), there is widespread uncertainty about how this works and when they can be issued – discretion again. In fact, their research points to a very uneven regional geography of EU migration governance, where ‘the Swedish municipalities seem to be at a loss about how to treat EU citizens who are living in Sweden and need social support’ (Spehar et al., 2017: 118). Nygren’s (2017: 32) work further underlines this, revealing an absence of municipality level guidelines about how EU citizens should be treated and a general ignorance among everyday state officials, ‘currently left to reach their own judgements on how to interpret legislation and regulations and to define what is and is not their responsibility, all without any praxis to fall back on’, not knowing how to process residence permits or how to deal with different job situations. The upshot is a frustrating and unpredictable experience for EU migrants trying to register, something Daria Bogdanska’s (2019) biographical graphic narrative *Wage Slaves* illustrates very well, animating her life as an undocumented Polish migrant in Malmö, up against a never ending series of intimidating bureaucratic hurdles.

Of course, there are other bureaucracies which also cause harm to citizens and residents, besides the *personnummer* (Düvell, 2010). Growing research on highly skilled workers reveals an immigration system which leaves traditionally more privileged people in precarious positions, navigating difficult, protracted bureaucracy which creates a very disorientating ‘temporally thick’ border (Axelsson, 2017). In related work, Allen and Axelsson (2019: 120) discuss how the border is ‘stretched out’ for those in low skilled jobs, who have to wait for four years before being able to apply for citizenship. In the meantime, these practices leave migrants overly dependent on, often exploitative, employers: they are a ‘very powerful way of disciplining migrant workers who, if they lose their job, face deportation’ (Allen & Axelsson, 2019: 120). Other bordering and welfare bureaucracies also illustrate the often discriminatory role of discretion in the Swedish system. Sigvardsdotter (2013: 530) draws attention to the significance of having a ‘foreign look’ in arousing internal border police suspicion. Adman & Jansson (2017: 45) reveal how even the more mundane bureaucratic encounters are racialised, reporting on how, in a field experiment, municipal officials proved to be much friendlier in email exchanges with people with Swedish names over Arabic ones. Panican and Ulmestig (2016), moreover, illustrate that discretion is a fundamental part of how bureaucracy works in Sweden, even for white Swedish citizens, and especially for those on lower incomes. Social assistance, they argue, relies on individual administrators defining who is eligible and who is not, choosing whether to use sanctions against people, and even valuing people’s assets to assess whether they are able to claim. As these decisions and practices vary so much between person, office and locality, people are often at a loss how to navigate the system. Time and time again, and as our research will underline, the rational Swedish universalist welfare state and immigration regime is shown to be conditional, discretionary and exclusionary.

**POSITIONING AND RESEARCHING POLISH MIGRATION TO SWEDEN**

Finally, there is more to consider when exploring the specific positioning of Polish migrants in Sweden. For background, Lubińska (2013) notes the historical trajectories of migration from Poland to Sweden, initially largely as wartime refugees, and now most recently after 2004, when Sweden was one of the few countries not to impose transitional controls on labour migration from the accession counties. Official statistics enumerate the Polish born population, as of 2019, at 93,722, the second largest EU migrant group after Finns (Statistics Sweden, 2020), so a significant presence across the country.

As discussed, the Swedish racial regime, while still too often unacknowledged, is pervasive, and built around a recognition of whiteness as constitutive of Swedish identity. This obviously presents an advantage for Poles, certainly over other migrants of colour who are racialised more severely (Lundström, 2017), as well as Roma migrants who face systemic police intimidation and brutality (Morrell, 2018; Barker, 2017a: 122). However, even as, largely, white migrants, Poles face a difficult time fitting into a landscape which has differentiated this whiteness into many categories, creating a racial hierarchy elevating northern over southern (Kjellman, 2013: 197), and more recently eastern, Europeans. As Leinonen & Toivanen (2014: 162-3) argue, constructions of whiteness are so inflected with class, language, accent, that ‘it would be a simplification to argue that being regarded as “white” equals being “invisible” in Nordic societies’. Research with Polish and Lithuanian migrants in Norway and Iceland underlines the specific racialisations East Europeans face, being perceived as backward, unprofessional, uncivilised, threatening, and just generally not fully European (Van Riemsdijk, 2010; Loftsdóttir, 2017). Given all the discretion evident within Swedish bureaucracy, it seems reasonable to ask whether this racial backdrop would be relevant for the street level encounters that eastern Europeans have to negotiate.

In this article we explore the position of Poles in Sweden through empirical material gathered for a transnational project on Polish migrants in Sweden, Norway and the UK[[1]](#endnote-1). We concentrate here on 15 interviews collected with Polish migrants living and working in Malmö (9) and the wider Skåne County (6) in early 2018, undertaken by author B, a native Polish speaker with extensive experience of living and working in Scandinavian contexts. Initially, an email was sent out to the larger project’s original survey participants living in Skåne County who had consented to being contacted for interview. 12 people were selected for interviews from those who replied. The remaining participants were recruited through snowballing, with the help of those recruited through the email. Much has been written about Malmö in terms of racialized depictions of migration and community (Gressgård, 2016) but we are not able to consider this directly here. Our focus, instead, is less on the city itself and more on the bureaucratic encounters our participants experienced.

Of the fifteen people interviewed, eight were women and seven were men, with ages ranging from 28 to 57. In terms of occupation at the time of the interviews, our participants included three nurses, three construction workers, someone who was currently unemployed, a stay at home mum, a doctor, a manicurist, a cleaner, a pharmacist, a teacher and a truck driver. Interviews lasted around two hours and were arranged in mutually convenient and comfortable locations such as coffee shops, public libraries or participants’ homes. Interview recordings were transcribed and then translated from Polish into English, with all names and any other identifiable details anonymised. Because our relatively small sample allowed us to focus on exploring the depth and nuance in the testimonies rather than look for representative patterns, the transcripts were analysed ‘manually’ and holistically, looking out for key themes without losing the richness and connectedness of the biographical arcs. Our article here presents these interview conversations, concentrating on what our participants revealed about their experiences of the *personnummer* registration process, as well as their reflections on how they approach, encounter and circumnavigate this everyday state.

***PERSONNUMMER*: BUREAUCRATIC BARRIERS AND EXPLOITATIVE PRACTICES**

While we expected the *personnummer* to be an important part of the interview conversations – and we did ask about it directly – we were taken aback by just how central it was to many people’s accounts. In her work on the technology of emigrant diaspora citizenship – on getting the right emigrant documentation – Williams (2019: 5) found that that in her interviews, ‘Where the state bureaucracy works as it ‘should’, there is no story to tell’. We found a similar structure in our conversations with those who had registered easily, with the *personnummer* being dispatched quite quickly. Beata, a doctor recruited directly from Poland, claimed that *‘everything was organized by that (recruitment) company. We had a job waiting for us here from the very beginning. We signed the contract and got the personnummer before we left Poland.... We got this personnummer immediately, not the temporary one, but the permanent one’*.Bartosz’s experience of being recruited for a stonemasonry company was also straightforward, enabling him to apply for his *personnummer* quickly: ‘*I got a permanent contract immediately, just like that… if you don’t have a permanent contract you won’t get those numbers’*.Even these brief accounts, however, reveal awareness of the fundamental importance of getting the right work contract in order to register.

*Not* being able to register for a *personnummer* was not only the more prevalent experience across the interviews, but was dominant in these narratives, discussed in detail as a hugely disruptive, frustrating and lengthy battle – Axelsson’s (2017) thick temporal borders in action, affecting EU citizens as well as those governed under the visa system. As our interviews underlined time and again, the ability to prove residency, and so secure the *personnummer*, is difficult, if not impossible, if on short term work contracts, or if simply arriving for the purpose of *seeking*, rather than taking up work, a right which is supposed to be a tenet of EU mobile citizenship (Spehar et al., 2017: 119). For example, Justyna arrived in Sweden looking for work as a nurse, but could only find a temporary position, not the long term work needed to secure a *personnummer* registration. She was sent back and forth between her employers and the Tax Agency office until she finally acquired a temporary number months later:

*And then the troubles with the Swedish system started. In order to start working I needed these numbers, but to get those numbers I had to be in work. So, the exercise of squaring the circle began. I went to Skatteverket [Swedish Tax Agency] and showed them the email from my employer that they want to hire me. They said: “Yes, but you can get the number once you have already started working”. I went back to my employer, they said: “Yes, but you have to have this number”. It was ridiculous.*

In a similar experience, Daria Bogdanska (2019: 25) shares the intimidating wording of a letter she received from *Skatteverket*, writ large in black and white that although she was an European Economic Area (EEA) citizen, she was still not entitled to register:

*You have registered moving to Sweden and you are an EEA citizen. In your registration you have stated that your intent is to seek work in Sweden. Since you are searching for work and thus not financially active, the Tax Authority does not find that you have proven your right to reside in Sweden. You have also not shown a residence permit issued by the Migration Agency.*

Patrycja spoke of the problems her neighbours had been having:

*my neighbour, an elderly Polish lady, her son has a girlfriend from Poland too. She comes to visit him, the same as me at the beginning. And this lady said that her son and his girlfriend have the same problem. They don’t know how she is supposed to stay and live here (…) She asked me, how did you manage to get this personnummer? They don’t want Polish people here anymore. It’s hard to get the personnummer here. She said that sometimes they send people home, they don’t let them stay.*

Embedded in these stories then is evidence not only of a conditional and exclusive system in action, but also the emotional impacts it wreaks – not just exhausting and disorientating, but with genuine threat attached; the arguably racialised sense that ‘they don’t want Polish people here anymore’, the ultimate insecurity of reading that you have not ‘proven your right to reside’, and hearing that ‘sometimes they send people home’. Jakub, unable to start working or attend Swedish language classes offered by the municipality, described the impact his *personnummer* limbo had on him during his early months living in Sweden:

*For the first four months I didn’t do much, because I didn’t have a personnummer… These first months were difficult, mentally, because you can’t do much. You’re stuck in this nothingness. …. this personnummer is so very hard to get and it takes a terribly long time.*

This all concurs with the literature on exclusions in the system and the lengthy, laborious and everyday nature of the border bureaucracy of the *personnummer*, but it is worth underlining again that these people were in Sweden as EU citizens, theoretically allowed to live and seek work on equal terms. To go back to Williams (2019: 5), it is important to assert that the dominance of these tales is not necessarily evidence of a state which has *not* been working as it should, but rather one which is working very effectively to protect its EU mobility borders on multiple fronts and scales (Tervennon et al., 2018), inviting favoured migrants in to the inner life of the country while alienating and segregating those deemed less deserving.

The stark reality of trying to live without a *personnummer* permeated many of the accounts we collected (Sigvardsdotter, 2013). Martyna, who had lived without a *personnummer* for over a year, wanted to warn about the brutality of the exclusions she and others have faced:

*You have to have it to be able to function in this society. In Sweden you cannot do anything without the personnummer. You cannot get a phone subscription, no bank account, no gym membership. Practically nothing. Everything is connected to your personnummer. If you cannot get it, it will be very difficult for you to function in Sweden. You are out of the system.... You will not get a job... you will not be able to register as unemployed.*

Grzegorz desperately wanted his family to join him but could not invite them all the while he was waiting to be registered, unable to offer them basic amenities: ‘*When you are not registered here, you don't have access to school, hospital, health care, nothing’*. Other people spoke about specific difficulties with housing, painting a picture of a rental market starkly segregated by *personnummer* statu*s.* Both Jakub and Martyna talked about their lack of a *personnummer* forcing them into ‘nightmarishly expensive’ private, sub-rental and informal tenancies, without any legal protection, unable to access the large housing-associations which rent out good quality, fairly priced apartments, complete with associated tenants’ rights and protections.

In a further bureaucratic complication, four of our informants were at one point issued with a temporary *personnummer* or *samordningsnummer*, co-ordination number (Spehar et al., 2017). While this enabled them to take up legal employment and pay taxes without having to present a permanent contract to the tax authorities, it did not allow access to services such as language courses or free health care, and still created bureaucratic headaches. Krzysztof and Justyna shared similar stories, both struggling to get bank accounts with their respective *samordningsnummers*. For Justyna, this not only created a farcical situation regarding the management of her wages, but the whole episode unsettled her, leaving her feeling that she had been treated less favourably because of her Polish status, the bureaucratic encounter hardening the language barrier she was already facing and publicly re-inscribing her position as an outsider:

*They were sending my salary in cheques because I didn’t have a bank account. I went to the bank to open an account and the lady in the bank said since I had a temporary personnummer she could not open an account for me… the lady didn’t want to help me because I spoke Polish.*

Other interviews also highlighted the inherent financial conditionality of *personnummer* registration. As noted by Erhag (2016: 212), those not in work have to ‘prove [to individual state officials] that they have sufficient resources as well as sickness insurance for the duration of their intended stay’, ensuring that they will not ‘recourse to public funds’ (Heindlmaier & Blauberger, 2017). Karolina and her partner found themselves facing questions about their income and savings as they tried to register:

*What was funny about this story, when we tried to register and get this personnummer, we were asked about a source of income, what we were planning to live from in Sweden… And in fact, we had some savings, for us it seemed enough to get by for some time, but the woman in the office said that if we want to register with sufficient funds, we have to prove that we have 120 or 150 thousand crowns, so 12 times 10 thousand crowns. We both were shocked. We said, “lady, if we had so much money we wouldn’t be here, we would be in Poland!”*

While this may be presented as an amusing anecdote, it was striking how angry and frustrated the participants were, across the board. There was a palpable feeling of injustice; exasperation at playing by the rules but being excluded from within, and disappointment with being promised an image of Sweden which simply does not exist. Martyna, again, was especially vocal about this:

*They say that Sweden is a country with great welfare, with this great history of workers movements, feminist movements etc. it is portrayed as this utopia. But when I came here as an immigrant, I discovered that it's much easier to be an immigrant in Spain or England than in Sweden… There is this huge image of Sweden as an open country, and everybody thinks that we are in the European Union so you can just take your backpack and show up… In reality it looks totally different.*

Krzysztof compared his experience in Sweden to when he was living and working in the Netherlands:

*When I was in the Netherlands everything was ready in one week: the work contract, a personal number and the bank account, there was no problem, but in Sweden it's more bureaucracy. Compared to the Netherlands or Germany it's a huge bureaucracy. Especially if you don't know the language, it is very hard to get anything done.*

While much of this anger was directed at the immediate bureaucratic technologies of the *personnummer*, it is important to emphasise here the structural barriers and associated exploitative labour practices behind these bureaucratic difficulties, at odds with people’s expectations of EU mobile citizenship, as well as experiences of it elsewhere. Work was at the centre of most people’s *personnummer* problems, with most issues relating to the kinds of contracts people were being offered. Repeatedly our informants highlighted that the tax authorities' requirement to provide proof of at least one year’s employment in Sweden in order to apply for a *personnummer* was simply unrealistic, as these contracts are not usually offered in the kind of industries they were seeking employment in, especially not without previous work experience in Sweden. Thus, they could not register for a *personnummer*, but were also unable to take up legal short term employment, because they needed the *personnummer* to pay taxes (Spehar et al., 2017: 119). For Martyna, this situation is not just exploitative, but subjects Swedes and non-Swedes to different expectations in terms of labour market participation:

*If you look at the labour market in Malmö, very few young Swedes have a full time contract without a termination date. And that is what Skatteverket requires to get the personnummer. I think these requirements don’t match today’s market and reality.*

This same dividing line, just manifested differently, was seen in Grzegorz’s account, where he revealed how his inability to get a *personnummer* was due to his status as a ‘self-employed’ driver working for a company registered in Poland, ‘posted’ labour not able to rely on in situ employer or state support despite physically living and working in Sweden (Woolfson et al., 2014).

Time and again our interviews revealed the stark contrast between those who came to work in higher skilled positions, who had faced few difficulties getting the type of contract they needed, and those working in lower or unskilled positions, who were ultimately forced into informal employment.Patrycja described how her employer refused for months to give her the necessary contract to start working legally:

*After four months living in Sweden I found a job at a beauty salon run by Polish women. I worked as manicurist. But they exploited me very much, they didn’t want to give me a contract, they didn’t want to give me anything. I told them that I needed a contract to get a personnummer, to be able to do anything whatsoever here. Because without it you are nothing here, it’s as if you wouldn’t exists here. But they just kept promising and promising…*

Martyna commented on how gendered the situation is, with women more likely to struggle to find the kind of work and employers who will secure the right sort of contract:

*Most of those jobs are typical men jobs, for example in construction, but when it comes to young people, women, apart from cleaning it is very hard to get a job before you come here … it's much easier for guys, most of the jobs in Sweden are physical…*

She herself had been pushed into informal, and exploitative, labour:

*It was impossible for me to get the number. I didn't know how to fix it, so I started to work illegally in a restaurant. I was earning half of what you normally get for this type of job, I was earning 50 crowns and the minimum is 113 crowns.*

Krzysztof had lived undocumented for almost three years, doing informal work on construction sites before he finally managed to find an employer who would give him the right contract. All this time he had been living without any safety net, without access to free healthcare or welfare benefits and thus at constant risk of falling into destitution in the event of an accident or illness.

The upshot, our interviews suggest, is a population which is simultaneously legal and precarious. The *personnummer* presents serious barriers to inclusion, first in terms of the high threshold of pre-existing economic security and residential eligibility required to initially register, and subsequently because of the sheer reach of the everyday activities and services – far beyond welfare assistance – which are rendered off limits without it. Our participants thus painted a picture of Sweden as a risky place to exercise freedom of movement, and certainly not the country to road test it without secure, long-term employment already in place. This point about work is crucial. When identification is so closely entwined with work contracts, the security of would-be mobile EU citizens effectively depends on the whim of their employers. It may be the street-level bureaucrats on the front line, making case by case decisions, processing the paperwork and checking the databases, but our interviews suggest that it is the employers, as well as the bureaucrats, who are holding the power and, by extension, managing the borders.

**SURMOUNTING THE SYSTEMS: DISCRETION AND CONNECTIONS**

While hours of interview time recounted the difficulties and exploitations of the *personnumme*r registration, one of the most interesting findings to emerge is, as the literature anticipated, not only how central discretion is in the Swedish system (Panican & Ulmestig, 2016), despite its computerised nature, but also how it can be circumnavigated with the right knowledge, contacts and resources. For a start, the interviews illustrated a general unpredictability in the whole process of registering, dependent on who was in the office that day (Fröhlig et al., 2019; Spehar et al., 2017; Nygren & Nyhlén, 2017). Drawing on her multiple trips to the local Swedish Tax Agency, Martyna had come to the conclusion that:

*Skatteverket… it has so many different functions, the people who work there cannot know all the laws, about tax, about living, about everything. They don't have all the information. When you go to the authorities each time you'll get very different information. One person says this, another person says that and you don't know which instruction you should follow.*

Jakub had similar observations, noting the variability of the competence and character of staff – this time much more positive – and the need to research the rules before turning up:

*Except for the Arbetsfӧrmedlingen [Employment Office], I have had very positive experiences, that there are kind people, not always the most competent in the world, often it happens that they don’t know something, or they say the wrong thing. And of course, sometimes it’s better to read up for yourself, only to do that, you need to know the language. You have to look it up in the internet, what rights you are entitled to, then it is easier to talk to them.*

Knowledge is clearly key; the interviews suggested that, like Tuckett’s (2015) participants in Italy, there are different approaches which can be taken to try and secure a *personnummer*. If the work route proves to be impossible, several people spoke about the *samb*o approach to registration, where you can be in a significant co-habiting relationship with (but not married to) somebody already formally established in Sweden. Karolina and her partner tried this. They initially both applied for temporary numbers; from this Karolina was eventually able to get a permanent work contract, which allowed her to apply for her *personnummer,* which in turn enabled her to support her partner from there. It was a very lengthy, complicated process but it seemed to work for them. In the end Martyna’s only choice left was to take a similar route, but this time, in an example of Scheel’s (2013: 281) ‘clandestine appropriation of mobility’, claiming *sambo* with somebody who she wasn’t really in a relationship with:

*I didn't get my personnummer based on work. I got it because I registered a legal relationship with a Swedish citizen, which was not real…. we did ‘sambo’. I didn't have to get married, I just had to pay a couple hundred crowns.*

As these account imply, the *sambo* route can feel risky and is not always successful. It can be policed quite closely, depending on who is making the decision. Radosław had to work very hard to ‘prove’ his relationship with his partner Ania when she joined him in Sweden and needed to get registered. Despite going to the tax office several times, answering a series of personal questions, and even being visited by a state migration official in their home to check on their living arrangements, their attempt to register her ultimately failed:

*And we got this form, how much does Ania know about Radek, and how much does he know about her. You know what questions they asked? What colour is the toothbrush that Ania uses? Such a question for ‘sambo’. But we didn’t manage to get this personnummer, we went to Skatteverket probably five times…. they didn’t accept our ‘sambo’. They didn’t give us the personnummer.*

The significance of *sambo* is twofold. First, while it offers another road to registration, if you know about it, it puts applicants in a perilously sensitive position where their closest relationship has to be scrutinised by migration agency staff, reliant, again, on their perceptions, decisions and discretion (Lipsky, 2010; Zacka, 2017). Secondly, and more pertinently here, it is the ‘knowing about it’ aspect which is crucial. Karolina and her partner had a clear, if complicated, strategy for getting the *personnummer*, but they only had this because a Swedish friend formulated the plan for them: ‘…*our Swede advised us, apply for this one first, because until you find a job, you probably won’t get a personnummer…* *this Swede, with whom we lived, helped us to fill in the papers’*.They wouldn’t have known this option existed otherwise, or how to go about filling in the paperwork.

This is a significant finding from our interviews, the centrality of the advice, and even physical presence, of a Swedish person in most of these *personnummer* orientated bureaucratic decisions and interactions. As Justyna commented, the key to getting registered is having *‘someone to help you, or enough patience’.* So many of the accounts we heard revealed the role of the benevolent Swedish friend, boss or acquaintance in navigating the registration bureaucracy on their behalf. Patrycja’s friend, for example, was helped by her neighbour’s daughter. Justyna’s chances were transformed by the interventions of her friend Ebba who accompanied her first to the tax agency to help her get a temporary number and, later on, the bank, when she was being refused a bank account because of her temporary number. Again, it was these mediations, and the assertiveness of her friend, which resulted in success:

*In the end Ebba got sick of me driving around from one place to another and she went with me to Skatteverket. I know she has a sharp temper… but there she outdid herself, like a dragon, she almost ate them!... with those papers she pressed them to give me the number. And I got a temporary number….I told her about the bank that they told me I could not open an account with that temporary number. And she said: “What?! Who told you this bullshit? Let’s go there!” We went there and she made a fuss: “My son works in Norway and he has a temporary number and they opened an account for him. What is the problem? ”.... And suddenly it was possible to open an account. Everything depends on what kind of person you get. Since then everything went smoothly.*

Once her temporary number and bank account were in place, it was her ‘really nice’ Swedish boss who then helped push for her permit to work as a surgery nurse in Sweden, calling, and pressurising, the *Socialstyrelsen [Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare]* on her behalf.

These are really important revelations from these interviews. Not all migrants will have a Swedish advocate, willing and able to explain and work the system for them. Certainly some of our participants had also been helped by other Poles who had experienced similar situations themselves, but the fact that many of those we interviewed took *Swedish* friends or bosses *with them* to various bureaucratic meetings is significant. While Polishness, otherness and race did not feature extensively in discussions about bureaucratic encounters, beyond what has been recounted here (feeling discriminated against in the bank, lack of understanding/interest about EU migrants’ positions), these themes were important in the wider conversations, with most people talking about times when they felt their Polish identity was an issue, either in personal relationships or in more formal exchanges. It is clear from our interviews that Swedish bureaucracy is intimidating, and especially so if you are not fluent in the language, let alone its official terminology. It is hardly surprising then, in this context, that taking a Swedish person with you should have become the central counter-tactic (Burridge et al., 2017: 244-5) for navigating the complicated *personnummer* systems.

The fact that this Swedish attendance in these encounters appears to have been so decisive in moving matters along for our participants raises uncomfortable questions. Why is it a *Swedish* presence which is so significant in these encounters – is it the language, confidence and local knowledge this person brings, or is this also an indictment of a racial landscape where east Europeans are still racialised as ‘less European’ (Van Riemsdijk, 2010; Loftsdóttir, 2017), with a status that is just more troublesome to understand and work through. What does this also reveal about how accessible the Swedish registration systems are for new migrants, from the EU and beyond? It seems that is this is a regime which, as Martyna says, is ‘*all about connections’*. Recent research has pointed to systemic problems of low level corruption, nepotism, cronyism and favouritism in Swedish bureaucracies (Bergh et al., 2016: 7). As Chambers (2020) suggests in India, even digitised state apparatus does not operate in a vacuum; prevailing cultural norms and routes to ‘getting on’ still come into play. When new EU migrants try and register in Sweden, they not only have to contend with the person in front of them, an immigration system designed to exclude on residential grounds, and a social environment which has deeply embedded racial hierarchies; they also have to learn a bureaucratic culture which, despite being computerised, still to some extent depends on *who you know.*

**CONCLUSIONS**

Firstly, our interviews have revealed some important idiosyncrasies within Swedish identity registration technologies which have much wider resonance too. The *personnummer* is clearly a critical internal bordering tool, and much of its influence comes with being so central to life in Sweden, but also so dispersed into the mundanities of daily existence. As an almost omnipresent requirement to do anything, it is a classic example of a disaggregated state in action. Its computerised, although not biometric, nature means that, in theory, there should not be too much room for discretion, both in registering in the first place, and in trying to access all these spaces and services without it. However, we have shown how these bureaucratic barriers are more malleable than expected. We believe that this case study therefore tells us something important about digitised borders and bureaucratic strategies more broadly. The *personnummer* registration might feel impenetrable to newcomers, but there are ways around it, if you know *how* to approach it, and are willing and able to take it on. This signals that there is still room for discretion and workarounds in computerised bureaucracies, even beyond framing the mood of bureaucratic encounters. It was these workarounds which ultimately enabled many of our participants to progress their lives in Sweden. These workarounds were not straightforward, however. We were especially taken aback by the almost ubiquitous presence of the Swedish helper, or fixer, in the collected accounts, and the revelation that these bureaucratic encounters are not simply an interface between state and migrant, but are actively, and heavily, mediated, and not just by the street level bureaucrats entrusted with this job. This of course reinforces an understanding that, for migrants, bureaucratic success in Sweden remains closely associated with insider status and *Swedish* input. The irony here is that the discretions and mediations evident in the Swedish systems do not make this regime less exclusive, but more so. We have not seen this in other literature, and we add new understandings here about how Swedish bureaucracy works for newcomers.

Secondly, we want to underline how central work is to the *personnummer* registration. Our respondents shared stories of being caught between two circuits of power – a calculative and territorial state bureaucracy which works to exclude as much as include, but *also* an exploitative neoliberal economic regime which keeps certain new immigrants in insecure work. Allen and Axelsson (2019) note how immigration bureaucracies leave migrants exposed to employer whims – but the two sets of power are mutually reinforcing. The catch 22 position people find themselves in derives from the pincer movement of not being the right kind of citizen with regards to population categorisation, and not being valued and protected in the labour market. Our participants could not talk about the *personnummer* without referring to their experiences of work; economic conditionality, and vulnerability, are central dynamics in the workings of this internal border.

Finally, we want to end by underlining again the exploitative character of the systems and processes in Sweden, and how little EU citizenship seemed to mean, for some of our participants, in terms of building secure lives. So much research in Nordic contexts focuses on immigration in terms of perceived threats to, and the protection of, the welfare state (Barker, 2017b; Sainsbury, 2012), but we show here how these exclusions go far beyond welfare bordering. Our participants should not have been living ‘off the grid’, and yet, there they were – yes unable to access healthcare, but also prevented from opening bank accounts, paying tax, signing up for housing, or bringing their families over to join them. This is a fundamental segregation from the central spaces and mechanisms of belonging in Sweden, and too much focus on welfare occludes the wider dangers these systems present. Poles in Sweden undoubtedly embody a kind of racialised privilege other migrants of colour may never enjoy. However, even with this in mind, it is important to not be numbed by these kinds of findings; these lived experiences of exclusion and illegibility signal real frailties in both Swedish universalism and contemporary mobile EU citizenship.

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1. The wider project reached over 5000 survey respondents, asking questions about migration experiences, family ties, welfare and work, and collected 45 in-depth interviews with Polish migrants in and around Malmö, Stavanger and Liverpool. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)