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The Golden Opportunity? Migration to Svalbard from Thailand and the Philippines

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The contribution focuses on international migration to rural peripheries in the Arctic, specifically Thais and Filipinx in Longyearbyen, Svalbard. Longyearbyen is entangled both in global migration trends and Norway's geopolitical interests in the Arctic. This article explores the worlds of Thai and Filipinx migrants, why they migrate here and how the national strategy for Longyearbyen impacts their lives in the context of recent developments. Svalbard's unique territorial status and legislation (e.g. absence of visas or work permits) facilitate international migration, but the place's specificities constrain migrants' inclusion (e.g. work-related and political rights, and access to social benefits). Higher chances for a good life of offspring motivate parents to stay longer than anticipated. The politically motivated absence of local focus on the needs of international migrants (e.g. language courses and counselling services) seeks to dampen migration. The result is a grey zone of informal power structures, unequal living, working and housing conditions, language barrier and perceived low level of social participation.

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INTRODUCTION: MEETING SUNNY

Sunny was the first person from Thailand I interviewed in Longyearbyen. It was shortly after my arrival in Svalbard, and I saw her posts on a Facebook page where locals sell and buy all sorts of goods. I thought she was leaving as she was selling household items, so I contacted her. Sunny replied she was only moving from one apartment to another, but asked what the interview would be used for. When I explained the aims of my research, she replied: 'If it will be good for some people I am willing to do it. I like to meet new people and new attitudes, too, to keep myself motivated'.

Sunny was living in Svalbard for a few years. She came alone, after a Filipina she was acquainted with told her 'why don't you come, there is no visa needed, no work permit, it's just cold'. She had a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics, but she started to work as a cleaner. She switched jobs every few months, all in the service industry relying on tourism. When I asked about her motivation to move to Svalbard, she said the primary one was money and family whom she was able to support with remittances. But after staying longer she started to feel attached to the place, which she described as very peaceful, reminding her of her life back in rural Thailand where everything is reachable on foot.

But despite some benefits, life was not easy. Many new migrants from Asia, mostly from Thailand and the Philippines, were coming to Longyearbyen since she arrived, and they were struggling with finding a job and a place to stay. Sunny was convinced the segregation many Thais experience was caused by the absence of a common language – a public Norwegian course was abolished a few years ago and only few Thais spoke decent English. She was concerned and even angry:

> We feel like inside we are lower, we are from the Third World, in our country there is inequality. The discrimination is in our head, it is scary for us to lose face, if you do something wrong in the public, that is the worst thing that can happen to you if you only stay with Thai people.

Sunny had no chance to learn Norwegian through her employer. She understood if she could speak the language, her chances of succeeding in the overheated job market would be higher, and felt frustrated when she realised her only option was to try to learn the language by herself. She came without a network or a family backup in town, and soon realised how disadvantaged she was by that. She felt discouraged by e-mails potential employers never replied to, and slowly lost trust in the presumed fairness and transparency of how life works in Longyearbyen.

It was not a dream to be in Longyearbyen, but it was not a dream to go to Thailand either, back to the corruption, low salaries and miserable job opportunities. In Svalbard it was cold, there were no trees, no hanging out while eating street noodles and a lot of fatigue and loneliness. 'We take this suffering just to have a good life in Thailand. People complain Thai people don't spend money, but they have to take care of their families'.

Working in Longyearbyen came to the detriment of Sunny's private life. 'I don't have the heart to find a man, I have too much responsibility back home'. Her mother was seriously ill and her sister was looking after their mother, so Sunny also had to provide for the sister who could not work and her two children. Sunny also mentioned 'it is painful to think about my nieces that now are forgetting me'.

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The burden grew as, after some time, she was also helping one of her relatives establish themselves in Svalbard. Sunny was trying hard to build up a business, so it would be easier to support so many family members.

> I would like to see everybody happy, that is why I am struggling here. [...] We should have the right to say what we need, we only work and go home and sleep, work, go home and sleep – but I want more from life! [...] My dream is to be the real voice of the Thai people. Not the voice only for my own benefit. What is the point of being a voice if you only get everything for yourself?

Sunny suffered from the political disempowerment, public invisibility and the assumed readiness to accept inconvenient working and living conditions. 'Many Thai women find a Norwegian partner for convenience, not for love. And then they have to do everything they are told to. Do you understand?' I thought I did.

From a dream, life in Svalbard became unviable for Sunny, and she decided to return to Thailand.

FOCUS, STRUCTURE AND AIMS

The aim of this contribution is better understanding of international migration patterns to rural peripheries in the Arctic, focusing on the settlement of Longyearbyen. Such a study is useful for several reasons.

First, Longyearbyen is both an epitome and an exception.[1] Processes unfolding here are in many ways typical in other Arctic places, but are also shaped by specific conditions in terms of legislation. The case of Thai and Filipinx migrants to Iceland (Bissat 2013; Skaptadóttir 2010, 2019) serves as a good comparison, with some patterns alike, but also with profound differences.

Second, international migration to Svalbard has accelerated and tripled since the turn of the millennium, but the last studies of a similar focus were published more than a decade ago (Jensen 2009; Moxnes 2008) when there were almost no migrants from the Philippines in Longyearbyen and the situation was in some key aspects different from today.

Third, the topic of inclusion is of particular interest in Longyearbyen, where official governmental discourse ignores the significance of the non-Norwegian population, and keeps portraying Longyearbyen as a stable Norwegian family community (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015–2016). As I show elsewhere (Sokolickova forthcoming), the town can hardly be characterised as stable, homogeneously Norwegian and/or a family community – or even a community in the anthropological sense of the term. It is a transient place with a fluid and highly international population, with every second household consisting of a single person (Statistics Norway 2021), and with barriers hindering empowerment and stronger community cohesion. The clash between the geopolitically motivated narrative about Longyearbyen, and the lived experience of Thai and Filipinx migrants is decisive in understanding their social participation, what mechanisms hinder inclusion and why earlier inclusion measures have been amputated. While being a workforce needed

1 I would like to acknowledge that I encountered the idea of understanding Longyearbyen both as a typical example and an exception at once in a conversation with my colleague Cecilie Vindal Ødegaard from the University of Bergen.

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in the service industry where they can hardly be replaced by Norwegian nationals, their lives in Longyearbyen contest the strategy firmly established by the Norwegian government.

The structure of the article is as follows. I used the story of Sunny as an exposé to the issues discussed and will later comment on a theoretical level the phenomena her particular experience unveils. After this section explaining the focus, structure and aims, I offer an introduction to the locale emphasising significant particularities in which the town is historically constrained.

The main analytical part follows, starting with a summary of Thai and Filipinx migration to Svalbard. I then include an ethnographic description of the social context in which Thai and Filipinx residents live in today's Longyearbyen. Well aware of the danger of generalising ethnographic representation, I give a short insight into the worlds of Thai and Filipinx residents as shared with me during the fieldwork. It includes the range of motivations for moving to Svalbard, different strategies for tackling challenges, educational background, job and working conditions, family situation, ties with the country of origin, written and spoken language, religion or free time.

More important, the analysis challenges the imaginary of Longyearbyen as a remote Arctic settlement that is homogenous, timeless and authentic, immune to social changes. Instead, Longyearbyen is a typical example of an Arctic site of intense mobility and seasonal labour migration, actively engaged in processes of globalisation. The scope of the analysis is to present the juxtaposition of two parallel and mutually entangled phenomena.

On one side, there is the rational decision to migrate and struggle in Longyearbyen, which appears as 'natural' when contextualised with the lived experience from the country of origin. Transnational ties such as improving the lives of family members in home countries through sending remittances, investment into real estate or businesses there, but also securing more opportunities in the life of the offspring belong to strong migration drivers.

On the other side, there is the politically motivated process of cutting and not introducing measures fostering inclusion, understood against the backdrop of the geopolitical interests of Norway in Svalbard. I use the term 'inclusion' here as understood by Uusiautti and Yeasmin (2019) or Karlsen (2021). Inclusion is 'an essential ingredient of overall community well-being and resilience' (Uusiautti & Yeasmin 2019: 5), having both formal and informal aspects. It signifies participation in social and political life, and access to available opportunities, services and resources. Focusing on inclusion means studying 'the conditionality of legal status and social and institutional processes of boundary making' (Karlsen 2021: 4) in a society where migrants are in a precarious position.

In this context, I frame my research questions as follows: Why do people from Thailand and the Philippines migrate to Svalbard, and how does the (mis)match with the goals of 'Svalbardpolitikk' impact their lives there? Why is segregation and social inequality growing, and how does that impact the population segments in focus?

INTRODUCTION TO THE LOCALE

The archipelago of Svalbard, situated in the Arctic Ocean between Northern Norway and the North Pole (Figure 1), embodies numerous geographical, political, environmental and societal paradoxes. Its strategic and geopolitical significance in

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the warming Arctic is rising, with sea ice diminishing and sea routes opening up, new species spreading to new habitats and natural resources becoming more accessible.

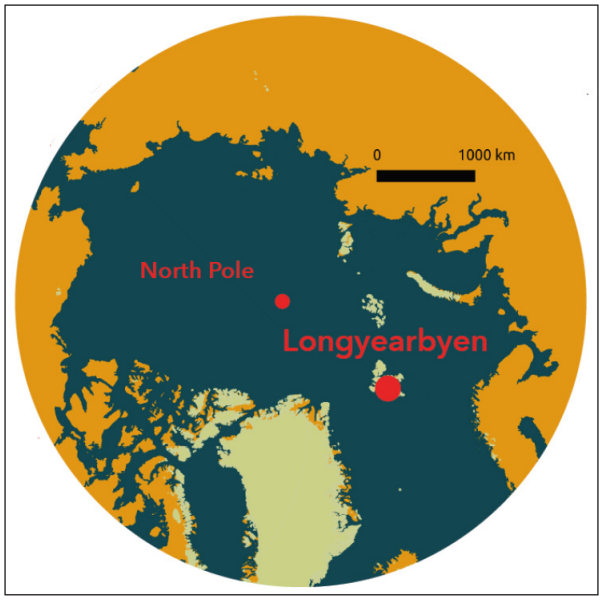

Figure 1 Situating Longyearbyen. Map: courtesy of Jakub Žárský.

Its territorial status is unique. The archipelago was first documented in 1596, and since been a location for extractive activities including whaling, hunting, research, tourism and coal mining (Eriksen & Sokolickova 2022). The Kingdom of Norway reached an international consensus on putting the archipelago under Norwegian sovereignty in 1920, with the Svalbard Treaty entering into force in 1925. There are 46 signatory parties of the treaty today, including all Arctic nations; most countries in Europe and North America; major Asian countries such as Russia, Japan, China and India; several Latin American and African countries; and Australia. Interestingly for the scope of this article, neither Thailand nor the Philippines acceded to the treaty.

Svalbard is officially part of Norway, but its legislation and governance are different. The key commitments of Norway exercising sovereignty over the territory are securing peace and stability in the region, plus environmental protection. Taxes significantly lower compared to mainland Norway are the main incentive to populate Svalbard since there is no Indigenous population. There are two family settlements on the island of Spitsbergen: the Russian-speaking Barentsburg of about 400 residents (Statistics Norway 2021) and the town of Longyearbyen of about 2,400 residents (Ibid.).

The treaty grants citizens of the signatory parties free access to the archipelago and their business activities. There is no work permit or visa needed, but if a country does not grant the migrant visa-free access to the Schengen area, it is necessary to have a visa to travel through Norway. The Norwegian Immigration Act is not valid in Svalbard, nor the Norwegian Social Welfare Act (Statistics Norway 2016), resulting in the paradox of easy migration, a non-existent system of social security, and limited health care and education. People have to provide for themselves in terms of finances and accommodation, which generally means they must have a job on the island. People moving to Svalbard from the Norwegian mainland with a permanent address and a personal number are granted access to health care and social security system. International migrants such as those from Thailand or the Philippines, most of whom have never lived in mainland Norway, only get a so-called D-number (on mainland

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Norway, a temporary solution for registration), and their access to health care and social security is dependent on their employers in Svalbard. Not having or losing a job means limited (after some time no) access to these services. According to existing legislation, moving back to the country of origin is recommended in such cases.

Longyearbyen is also difficult to label on the urban–rural nexus. In absolute number of its residents, it qualifies as a large village. But thanks to the bustling vibe stimulated by global tourism (put on halt during the COVID-19 pandemic) and international research, and also as a result of the high turnover of the population, many residents agree Longyearbyen combines in an odd and attractive way the benefits of a simple life with little traffic, little pollution, low crime rate and walking distances, with the advantages of living in a multicultural, diverse and reasonably anonymous environment with many opportunities in the realm of sports and culture.

The settlement itself was founded by an American businessman John Munroe Longyear in 1906 for the purpose of mining coal (Arlov 2003). After 10 years of American ownership, the Norwegian mining company Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani bought the settlement. For almost 100 years afterward the population of the town was almost exclusively Norwegian. Between the early 1990s and late 2000s, the town changed profoundly. Tourism and research proved to be the promising development paths. These changes should be understood in the context of simultaneous global developments, with the acceleration of globalisation including increased efficiency of communication and transportation means (Eriksen 2016). Not surprisingly, tourism and the related service industry generated many jobs unattractive for Norwegian applicants. Science also attracted international researchers. In 2006, there was an international population of 15% (Jensen & Moxnes 2008).

Despite the governmental wish to flatten the curve of population growth, repeated in the White Papers on Svalbard (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 1999, 2008–2009, 2015–2016), the population has constantly been increasing during the past several decades. The non-Norwegian population in Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund is being registered systematically since 2009, when there were 293 people without a residential address in mainland Norway living in these two settlements. In 2021, there were 753 non-Norwegians (Statistics Norway 2021). On 31 August 2020, 2,354 people were registered as residents of Longyearbyen in the Tax Office register, 36.5% of them from 53 countries outside Norway. The three biggest national minorities are Thai (137 people, 9%),[2] Swedes (108 people, 7%) and Filipinxs (100 people, 7%).[3] The current turnover rate is widely perceived locally as too high, with

2 In March 2020, a post was published on the Facebook page of the Royal Thai Embassy Oslo, stating that 'on 26 February 2020, H.E. Ms. Karntimon Ruksakiati, Ambassador of Thailand to Norway, visited the Thai community in Longyearbyen, a major town in Svalbard archipelago. There are about 200 Thai citizens living and working there, which is almost 10 percent of the whole population of 2,368 residents in Svalbard'. 'About 200' was also the usual reply of my Thai participants to the question of how big the population is, meaning there is an obvious mismatch with official data. I have come across this incongruity in various contexts, e.g. in conversations about emergencies related to evacuations. Volunteers responsible for informing people about the avalanche danger would recollect that more people lived in the housing units they went around, making the already daunting task of communicating danger to people who speak a different language even more difficult.

3 The pandemic impacted negatively the tourist and service industry, and some people including Thai and Filipinx residents lost their jobs and chose to move away from the island, but not as many as expected. As of 21 May 2021, there were 133 Thai citizens and 95 Filipinx registered in Longyearbyen (Tax Office, personal e-mail communication). It is likely that the numbers are inaccurate.

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43% of residents staying less than two years and 64% staying less than five years. Since 2009, three-quarters of the newcomers to Longyearbyen were women. The population is very young, with about half of the people aged 20–44, about 400 children and only few elderly (Statistics Norway 2021).

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

This article is based on research conducted in the locale between February 2019 and June 2021. My MSCA-IF CZ research project *boREALIFE: Overheating in the High Arctic* was designed as an open-ended participative ethnographic fieldwork, with the aim of documenting and analysing accelerating changes (Eriksen 2016) underway in the locale on several levels. I was interested in how residents perceive the changing environment, and the changing economic and societal structures. Main methods used during the fieldwork were qualitative interviews oscillating on the range from expert through semi-structured to narrative, participant observation and auto-ethnography.

The fact I lived in Longyearbyen with my husband and three children had a major impact on my work. It influenced which niches I got access to more naturally (international researchers, young families, guiding community, etc.), and which were less accessible (state administration, building industry, retired miners, etc.). Raising three children led to spontaneous interaction with other parents, including those with Thai and Filipinx migratory backgrounds, which helped me notice phenomena difficult to get insight into through research interviews. Throughout my stay, I conducted interviews with over 220 local residents. My aim was to engage in conversations where all groupings according to age, gender, nationality, length of stay in Svalbard and job were represented. The pool consists of 114 Norwegian nationals (7.5% of the total Norwegian population) and 93 nationals of other countries (10% of the total non-Norwegian population), based on the information from the Tax Office as of August 2020. In addition, I conducted semi-structured, narrative or expert interviews and focus groups with 25 more participants for the purpose of the project *Teenagers without land: Offspring of non-Norwegian migrants to Longyearbyen, Svalbard* funded by Svalbard Science Forum, where I spoke also to underage children over 16 years. Within both projects in total, I engaged in a conversation with 23 Thais (16% of the minority, 4 men and 19 women) and 9 Filipinx (9% of the minority, 6 men and 3 women). Most of the meetings were audio-recorded, with a few exceptions where the participant only allowed me to take written notes.

I became aware of the risk of mistrust and suspicion, thanks to Sunny, who was generous in sharing her opinions and explanations of how she understood the 'codes' and legacies of the past, and I met that worry repeatedly later with other participants. The potential danger my Thai and Filipinx participants fear has several causes. First, during the past decades as the numbers of migrants from Asia to Svalbard grew, several issues related to a sort of human trafficking, social dumping and exploitation were discussed publicly in Longyearbyen (Ylvisåker 2016). Local politicians have responded with varied success to these issues and not everything known is actively tackled. In addition, as the settlement is small, and many Thais and Filipinx have relatives in town, private issues among my potential participants complicated the research. Last but not least, I have been repeatedly told Thai women and Filipinas living in a relationship with Norwegian men are not willing to talk to social scientists as they do not wish to be represented as luck seekers who exchange their bodies for an economic upgrade.

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Another decisive factor that influenced my research among and with people from Thailand and the Philippines was the significant language barrier. After a few unsuccessful meetings where the anthropologist and the participant had no functional language in common (such as English or Norwegian), I occasionally asked a local translator for paid help. This strategy was efficient, and I incorporated it into the smaller follow-up project focused specifically on the issue of the second and third generation of non-Norwegians, where I raised funding for paying Thai and Filipinx field assistants. As the nature of the research underpinning this article is ethnographic, the number of participants is not the main criteria for the study's reliability. Intense collaboration with field assistants and the long-term stay in the locale are equally important here.

'OF COURSE WE MIGRATE': MOTIVATIONS, CHOICES AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

While the first citizen of the Philippines who probably arrived sometime in the 2000s to reside in Longyearbyen is not widely known, the cleaning business of the first well-established Thai woman who came to Longyearbyen about 30 years ago married to a Norwegian man is still operating. But Filipinx established themselves faster, thanks to their advanced English. Miners, and later workers in the construction industry and beyond, brought their Asian spouses to Longyearbyen.[4] Apart from women who migrated to Svalbard to join their Norwegian partners, most people born in Thailand or the Philippines living in Longyearbyen today have been encouraged to move to Svalbard by close or distant relatives. Yet some came because of a friend's idea, or even only information online about Svalbard being a visa- and work-permit-free area.

As Bissat (2013) summarises, 'a few Thai women with Norwegian husbands anchored the stream[5] in the 1990s, and then recruited both male and female workers from Thailand in roughly equal numbers. Thus, the current gender ratio among Thais in Svalbard is reportedly more balanced than that of countries where marriage (by women) is the only viable form of access' (p. 52). This finding is valid also for Filipinx in Longyearbyen. There are quite a few Thai–Norwegian and Filipina–Norwegian couples (no statistics available), and multi-ethnic relationships have been part of life in Longyearbyen for decades. Mistreatment as a result of a trade-off partnership has been reported recently (Malmo 2021).

Among my participants, moving to Longyearbyen to find a job at a place with a family network was the most common motivation. Finding or joining a Norwegian spouse is hardly ever the primary driver, but it can of course happen that relationships develop. A typical reasoning is comparing the possibilities in Svalbard with one's chances to live a dignified life in the country of origin where it is hard to find a stable and well-paid job, where good education and standard health care require large financial investments, or where life is not safe because of high level of criminality. 'We call it "the Golden Opportunity,"' a Filipino friend shared. Diligence and determination of East Asian migrants is appreciated by employers, and the hard work and dedication are motivated by making a living not only for oneself, but for others one cares about in Svalbard or elsewhere. As Skaptadóttir (2019) shows, it is also a typical pattern

4 According to Flemmen and Lotherington (2008), when Norwegian-born men marry a foreign woman, it is most often a spouse from Thailand, the Philippines or Russia.

5 I have objections to using terms such as 'stream' in discussing migration.

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in other Arctic locales with transnational migrants: 'The ability to care for those left behind, be it children, parents or others, is often an important reason for working abroad. Sending remittances can, in addition, boost people's social status in the country of origin' (p. 213).

WITH REGARD TO THE CHILDREN

There is one more specific segment of Thai and Filipinx citizens who did not choose to translocate: children. As of 6 April 2021, there were 11 Thai residents younger than 18, and 8 of them were born in Norway,[6] and 28 underage Filipinx, 4 of them born in Norway (Tax Office, personal e-mail communication). While the numbers of Thai children have lately been relatively stable, there has been a major influx since 2015 of Filipinx children who joined their parents. Most of these children arrived in school age, some as teenagers. Both the pre-pandemic developments in tourism employment and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (making some people stay who would normally only be seasonal workers) contributed to higher numbers of Filipinx children.

The connection between the determination of both Thai and Filipinx parents to keep working in Longyearbyen, and their hope for a better future for their children is evident. All my participants who have children state the chances for granting their offspring a less challenging life is the major driver for their resilience. The parents identify good and free education, opportunity to learn both Norwegian and English, and gaining skills that enable the offspring to find a job in Norway as the main reasons for considering Longyearbyen a good place for their children.

People in the first generation travel to the country of origin to visit their family at least once a year – mostly during the dark season, which is also the low season for tourism in Svalbard. They often look forward to the day they might finally return to the place they have been missing while in Svalbard. But it is equally common to hear the plan is to stay for 10 or, in case of young parents, even 20 more years. Plans to stay in Longyearbyen for a decade or more were much more common among my Thai and Filipinx participants than among Norwegian or other European participants. The typical milestone would be when the child or children finish their studies and can live on their own. Fewer parents are hoping for a future for their children in Longyearbyen – more for a future in Norway. Hardly ever do parents say they wish their children return to Thailand or the Philippines. Specific is the situation of Thai women and Filipinas married to Norwegian men; these multi-ethnic families divide their time between Norway and Southeast Asia, able to live 'a good life' in both countries to which also the children born or raised in these relationships keep a bond. This practise of spacial splitting of the family life was temporarily interrupted by strict travel regulations in 2020 and 2021.

When the town became paralysed by severe restrictions at the outbreak of the pandemic in spring 2020, and local politicians worked hard to get governmental funding for so-called 'third-country citizens' to get flight tickets 'back home', the interest was much lower than expected. The local authority spent 2 million NOK of the

6 Giving birth in Longyearbyen is discouraged (but not illegal or impossible as often wrongly stated in the media) because of limited health care. Nearly all children 'born here' are thus actually born in mainland Norway and travel back north with their parents just a few days later.

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allocated 7 million NOK on tickets. In total, 20 people were granted funding for a one-way flight ticket, most from Thailand (Bårdseth 2020). Several of the 20 applicants returned to Svalbard after just a few months. The administration soon noted the factor of having children in Longyearbyen was decisive for non-European residents to reject the offer because if an adult applied for the grant the whole nuclear family had to leave (Bårdseth 2021a). 'People don't want to go back because there is no future for them. Most of those who travel back are single or have no kids. Or they have children, but they are grown up and can survive on their own' (Interview with Thai woman, 11 September 2020).

Those who did not succeed in establishing themselves in Longyearbyen well enough and left their children in the country of origin – brought up by the children's aunts, uncles or grandparents, – still claim the years spent in Longyearbyen working hard to be able to support their children's studies were worth the emotionally exhausting effort. Research interviews where my participants shared with me their reasoning for these decisions were demanding for me, and I was often left with an intense feeling of both admiration for my participants' will and moral strength, and gratitude for me being able to live in Longyearbyen with all the three boys by my side.

RACIALISED JOB MARKET

According to my fieldwork experience, it is more common among Thai women and Filipinas to have a university degree than among their male co-citizens. Just as in the case of the Filipinas in Iceland discussed in Skaptadóttir (2019), it is difficult to find a job in Longyearbyen where they can use the expertise gained through education in the countries from which they migrated. The reasons are language barrier and Norway's strict rules for acknowledging diplomas from 'third countries'. Despite being an interior designer, an agronomist or an accountant, the jobs awaiting Thai and Filipinx migrants are limited to the spheres of cleaning, shop assistance, construction works, catering (hotels, restaurants and cafés), massage studios or the Thai store. While the sphere of guiding is attractive for many young non-Norwegian people who enjoy outdoor life, there is to my knowledge only one person originally from Thailand who works occasionally as a guide, and no guides from the Philippines. To establish a competing business in the niches already occupied by those who arrived earlier is a daunting challenge. A general pattern appears with a clear link between arriving to the locale earlier meaning higher chances for finding a permanent and full-time job position, and saving enough money to buy property (a key factor as housing is very scarce and expensive). Thai and Filipinx migrants express willingness to re-qualify and take further education, be it in Svalbard, in Norway or online, to upgrade to wider job opportunities.

RELATIONS WITH THE MAJORITY AND INNER DIVERSITY

My Thai and Filipinx participants, obviously with the exception of those who live in multiethnic relationships, mostly found it difficult to relate to the rest of Longyearbyen's population other than professionally. Many are used to living their private lives hidden from the gaze and vibe of the majority, with free time dedicated to family living in Longyearbyen, digitally cultivating relations with people in the country of origin, socialising during dining events or just resting in solitude after exhausting work shifts. Religion (Buddhism in case of Thais and Catholicism in case of Filipinx) is being practiced in privacy, but some Filipinas and their children visit every now and then the local Protestant church, especially but not exclusively when there is a Catholic mass. Few of my non-Asian participants have a closer relationship with

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somebody of Asian origins, but this changes with age; as stated earlier, there are about 40 children living in town from these two countries, plus there are children having Norwegian citizenship and one Thai or Filipinx parent (no statistics available) – to my knowledge, in all cases the mother.

The Thai segment of the population is often seen as coherent from the outside by non-Thai residents. My experience suggests there certainly exist firm family bonds that substitute for the absent safety net of social welfare, but to describe Thais as a united and egalitarian community would be misleading. Power structures have continued to develop even through signs of cultural isolation, and a grey zone of rules and mechanisms illegible for the majority has been known for at least two decades (Jensen & Moxnes 2008). Those who are well established, have a long personal history in town, have a stable job and/or master Norwegian are more competitive and therefore can act from a position of power over newcomers, especially those that arrive in Svalbard without any extended family members already on the island. 'There are more people willing to work so it's more difficult to find a job', a Thai woman shared.

The Filipinx segment is linguistically more diverse, but most people understand either Tagalog, Cebuano or Kapampangan. Nevertheless, there is a certain language barrier within the grouping, which makes life harder especially for older children who move to Longyearbyen and have to rely on English when communicating with Filipinx peers. Many Filipinx speak English on an intermediate or even advanced level, while among Thai residents fluent English is not a typical competence. There are good reasons to believe this difference creates locally a competitive advantage for Filipinx migrants, and might partially explain why a later arrival still allowed for quick establishment and population growth. Another significant factor might be the long-term strategy of the government of the Philippines encouraging people to emigrate, adapt and support their network in the Philippines through remittances (Skaptadóttir 2019).

While the first generation keeps communicating in the mother tongue among themselves, there is evidence second and third generations lose language competence in the mother tongue fast unless parents or guardians dedicate much free time to teaching children how to read and write. Given the different script and complex grammar, the phenomenon is even more pronounced among Thai children.

SHRINKING MARGINS OF INCLUSION

The Norwegian government firmly states that Longyearbyen is a Norwegian community. It is clearly indicated in governmental White Papers the growing number of international residents is worrisome. The discourse of Norwegianization (Arlov 2020) increased sharply during my fieldwork. In a reader's letter to the local newspaper, the leader of the local branch of the national Conservative Party writes:

> To do local politics can be challenging. One of the things I think is most demanding is that you are almost expected to have racist attitudes. [...] I get truly sad when my colleagues and friends tell me that they feel like second-class citizens in our town, because they are not Norwegian citizens. [...] This is where they want to live. [...] In Longyearbyen, it has become ok to discriminate on the basis of nationality. Foreign citizens are kept out of the housing market and they are told that they do not need to apply for jobs because only Norwegians will be considered. (Johannesen 2019)

In academic literature (Pedersen 2017, 2021), internationals are portrayed as performing activities that threaten Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard. Such representation has major implications for inclusion.

As I explained earlier, non-Norwegian population growth accelerated as a result of combined factors. Opening up locally for more research and tourism, and global developments in communication, lifestyle and transportation turned Longyearbyen into an attractive and accessible place for people worldwide looking for jobs, adventure, life in the Arctic, a new start, a better future for their children and beyond (Sokolickova & Soukupova 2021). In 2007, the town was awarded the prize 'International Community' by Norwegian Crown Princess Mette Marit, which today is either forgotten because of the high turnover, or bitterly remembered as a different era when it still was normal to appreciate the diversity of the town's population. Since then the numbers of non-Norwegians, especially Thais and Filipinx, grew sharply and strength turned into a supposed weakness.

The result of these contradictory processes is deepening segregation and deteriorated social climate. In the comments shared by my Thai and Filipinx participants, I identify three main issues perceived as urgent.

First, as Norwegian legislation regulating working conditions is only partially valid in Svalbard, people without permanent full-time jobs often accept conditions that are immoral, and they are exposed to vulnerabilities related to the limited housing market. My participants would share with me accounts of working hours that had never been paid by the employer, or wages of Thai employees working at the same place over 10 years equal to wages of newly arrived Norwegian employees. People active in the trade union that has a local branch in Longyearbyen claim it is on the verge of impossible to recruit Thai and Filipinx workers to join, and they ascribe it to cultural differences. When the pandemic resulted in hundreds of people laid off, many Thais and Filipinx were forced to give up their rented flats and adjust to even more cramped living conditions. It is perhaps here where it might be a significant comparative advantage to find a Norwegian spouse with housing granted through his employer.

Second, there is a growing language barrier as the government states the local authority is not obliged to offer any public course (neither free nor on payment) of Norwegian language for adults. To learn Norwegian is harder in Longyearbyen compared to mainland Norway where non-governmental organizations (NGOs), libraries and other actors offer courses. On the practical level, it means no state money will be allocated to such an offer in Longyearbyen, so the course would require reallocating funds from the town's budget elsewhere. My participants also often confirmed that when the course was available, they did not prioritise it if it collided with working hours. Speaking Norwegian upgrades one's job outlook and access to information (and thus also inclusion and informal power, see Skaptadóttir 2010). On the other hand, if the job and the money earned are the main and sometimes only reason for being in Longyearbyen the risk of losing part of it or even risking the reputation of a diligent worker always at the employer's disposal seems too high compared to poorer Norwegian. There is a gap between a clear understanding of the role the language plays in inclusion (Sokolickova & Soukupova 2021) across the population segments, and the low probability of tackling the issue as it would require a motivation campaign with incentives for migrants who would attend a course instead of working. While on mainland Norway there are both state organizations

and NGOs doing the job, the only local offer as of today is a Language Café organised by Norsk Folkehjelp Svalbard every second week for 2 hours in the public library. It is mostly attended by European and American migrants who often are students, researchers, entrepreneurs or freelancers. An offer adjusted to the needs of Asian migrants is missing.

Finally, the Thai and Filipinx residents mostly prefer to be under the radar, which is a convenient strategy as long as life is unproblematic. Should issues occur such as domestic violence, discrimination, bullying, exploitation, problems with visas (e.g. when travelling to Norway or Asia and back to Svalbard through Norway) or even only lack of information and confusion, it is difficult to get assistance, as it became visible in the recent case of domestic abuse (Bårdseth 2021b). Even though the Governor's Office does provide help to, e.g., people exposed to domestic violence, the perception among migrants is that there is no easily accessible local counselling body: 'If in trouble we don't know where to look for help' (Interview with Thai woman, 10 April 2019). A Norwegian friend shared with me an experience with a Thai woman who approached her in a corridor with a piece of paper, where it was written HELP ME. With the use of Google Translate they managed to communicate what the issue was, but my friend could not act on it. Such situations might build unofficial, informal structures of mutual help, but they also allow for feelings of frustration and hopelessness on all sides, unhealthy dependencies and ambiguous power relations.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This contribution presents and analyses patterns in migration from Thailand and the Philippines to Longyearbyen, a settlement on the island of Spitsbergen combining features of a cosmopolitan centre and an Arctic periphery. The presence of Thai and Filipinx migrants is part of the last quarter of the town's 115-year history. While the Thai population steadily grew since the 1990s, the Filipinx became more numerous only during the last decade.

Based on my 2.5-year-long ethnographic fieldwork, I present motivations and strategies of the first generation of migrants from Thailand and the Philippines to Svalbard, which are partially in accordance with the reasoning and ways of adjustment of their fellow citizens in other Arctic locales like Iceland. The unique territorial status and intricate legislation of Svalbard make international migration smoother as Norway cannot require any visa or work permit from the residents, but the place's specificities work in some aspects also as traps (e.g. when it comes to the workers' rights and access to social benefits).

Having children, both in the locale or left behind in the country of origin, is the strongest motivation for my participants to stay in Longyearbyen for decades. While the first generation plans at one point to return to the country of origin, with which they actively and regularly cultivate connections, the second and third generations hope for a future in Norway. Staying for their whole life in Longyearbyen sounds like an unattractive compromise for the offspring, but still prevails over returning to the countries they only know from sporadic visits and languages they hardly ever master in written form.

Migration to Longyearbyen from Thailand and the Philippines is portrayed as problematic with regard to the official narrative of Longyearbyen being a community of financially secure Norwegian families. The local authorities are discouraged centrally to make

the lives of international migrants easier. Measures such as communication in several languages, public language courses or official structures of help and counselling are missing and unlikely to be established. All recent changes in the legal landscape point in the direction of exclusion: access to BankID (personal electronic identification necessary for a range of online services in Norway) is restricted since early 2019, the only local bank was closed in late 2020 resulting in non-Norwegians moving to the island unable to open a bank account, and the Ministry of Justice is currently suggesting taking away voting rights from anybody who has not lived on mainland Norway for a minimum of three years (Regjering.no 2021). The hope is dampening migration; the result is a grey zone of informal power structures, dependencies and inequalities cemented over time. Even though marriage as an unsustainable response to migration policy (Bissat 2013) is not by any means the only option in Longyearbyen, unstable jobs, social dumping and the tense housing situation might contribute to harmful trade-off practices.

There are many other facets of the discussed phenomenon I did not have space to elaborate on. One of them is the issue of localness, not at all trivial in Longyearbyen where the population is transient, and where communitification and empowerment are systematically undermined for geopolitical reasons (Sokolickova forthcoming). The length of stay and the time horizon for staying among my Thai and Filipinx participants is long compared to the short- and middle-term residents from Norway and other countries in the 'Global North'.

Another topic to explore is the problem of racism and practices of discrimination that hinder the migrants from mobilising their cultural capital (Erel & Ryan 2019). My article only hints on it – not because of limited space, but rather because of not mastering a language that would enable me to narrate the entangled stories with myriads of nuances and laden with deep ethical concerns.

Sunny's dream about becoming the voice of the Thais in Longyearbyen, become politically active and improve the situation of the underprivileged did not come true. I am not idealistic about the possible impact of academic writing, but I owe to her my motivation to conduct research and publish on topics that were part of her lived experience in Longyearbyen.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

This research has been approved by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions ethical review process.

Ethical participation in the study was secured through an informed consent.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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