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Integration, Information Exposure and Security-Relevant Vulnerability Indicators among Legally Resident International Students from Selected Post-Soviet Countries in Poland: An Exploratory Single-Institution Study

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The study examines how integration gaps and information-environment exposure relate to security-relevant vulnerability indicators among legally resident international students from selected post-Soviet/CIS countries at a private university in Warsaw. Nationality, religion, ethnicity and legal status are not treated as risk categories.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The study asks how integration gaps are linked to vulnerability indicators in a university setting. It is based on fieldwork conducted between October 2024 and April 2025: 400 questionnaires, 300 valid survey responses, 186 qualitative follow-up cases and

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11 expert interviews. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively and through cross-tabulations; qualitative material was analysed thematically.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article connects integration, social embeddedness, information exposure and vulnerability indicators, then presents findings according to the research problems.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The findings show varied integration trajectories. Weaker social embeddedness, limited Polish-language use, perceived exclusion and narrow social or informational environments appeared as vulnerability indicators. A coded subset expressed polarising geopolitical framings, treated as vulnerability signals rather than evidence of criminal intent, extremist affiliation or collective threat status.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS: The article treats integration, institutional trust and information-environment resilience as preventive variables in higher education. It recommends language support, anti-discrimination procedures, media literacy, counselling and peer integration. The findings are limited to one institutional case.

KEYWORDS:

integration gaps, information exposure, vulnerability indicators, international students; preventive security

INTRODUCTION

Student migration from former Soviet republics to Poland is part of regional mobility shaped by post-communist socioeconomic change, educational mobility and Poland's integration into European structures (Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2019, pp. 5–7). It is also linked to the internationalisation of higher education, which has affected Polish universities' recruitment practices, legal frameworks and responsibilities toward international students (Kierznowski, 2017, pp. 133–136).

Although student mobility brings academic, economic and cultural benefits, it also raises questions for migration, integration and security studies. In the case of legally resident students from selected post-Soviet/CIS countries, the key issue is not nationality, religion or legal status, but the conditions under which weak integration, limited social embeddedness, perceived exclusion or exposure to external information environments may become security-relevant vulnerability indicators.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing research discusses migration, integration, radicalisation, diaspora politics and foreign influence operations, but legally resident international students from selected post-Soviet/CIS countries in Poland remain underexplored, especially in security-, diplomacy- and international-relations-related programmes. University settings require attention because they connect integration, social embeddedness, information exposure, institutional trust and student support.

AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this article is to identify integration-related and information-environment vulnerability indicators among legally resident international students from selected post-Soviet/CIS countries at one private university in Warsaw. The study does not assess students as a security threat. It examines whether weaker integration, limited social embeddedness, perceived exclusion and exposure to external geopolitical narratives are associated with elevated vulnerability indicators and may inform non-stigmatising institutional safeguards.

MAIN RESEARCH PROBLEM

The study examines how integration gaps among legally resident international students from selected post-Soviet/CIS countries are associated with security-relevant vulnerability indicators in the studied university setting.

SPECIFIC RESEARCH PROBLEMS

The analysis addresses five problems: P1: forms of social, linguistic and institutional integration; P2: indicators of weaker integration, social isolation and perceived exclusion; P3: links between lower integration and exposure to external informational environments or polarising geopolitical narratives; P4: respondents' accounts of social networks, institutional experiences and information environments;

and P5: safeguards that may reduce vulnerability indicators without stigmatisation, profiling or collective attribution of risk.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions correspond to these five problems and concern integration patterns, vulnerability indicators, external narrative exposure, qualitative mechanisms and non-stigmatising institutional responses.

HYPOTHESES

Given the exploratory single-institution design, the hypotheses are directional and do not support population-wide generalisations.

H1: Lower integration is associated with higher vulnerability indicators.

H2: Weaker Polish-language use and lower host-society participation are associated with stronger reliance on co-ethnic environments.

H3: Perceived discrimination or exclusion is associated with identity isolation and higher vulnerability exposure.

H4: Higher exposure to external informational environments is associated with greater susceptibility to polarising geopolitical narratives.

H5: Awareness and use of university support mechanisms are associated with lower vulnerability indicators.

H6: Qualitative narratives explain mechanisms that survey data alone cannot fully capture.

SCOPE, TERMINOLOGY AND NON-STIGMATISATION PRINCIPLE

The article limits its claims to the studied institution and sample. “Security-relevant vulnerability indicators” refer to social, institutional and informational patterns that may increase susceptibility to polarising narratives, external influence or radicalisation pathways under specific conditions. They do not imply criminal intent, extremist affiliation, wrongdoing or threat status.

“Integration gaps” mean weaker social, linguistic or institutional embeddedness, including limited contacts, language use, institutional trust and awareness of support mechanisms (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2005; Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2019). “Information-environment exposure” refers to media sources, networks and geopolitical narratives shaping perceptions of Poland, Ukraine, Russia and the West. “Threat” is reserved for broader geopolitical processes, not for the studied students. This distinction matters because public perceptions of Muslims and migrants in Poland may amplify security concerns despite limited or contested empirical evidence (Narkowicz & Pędziwiatr, 2017; Dudzińska & Kotnarowski, 2019).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATION GAPS, INFORMATION EXPOSURE AND VULNERABILITY PATHWAYS

Security-relevant vulnerability is understood as a situational configuration of social, institutional and informational factors, not as an attribute derived from nationality, religion, ethnicity or legal residence. Migration-related vulnerability is shaped by social embeddedness, perceived exclusion, identity positioning and institutional context rather than by origin or religion alone (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Weine et al., 2016; Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015).

For international students, integration refers to language use, social embeddedness, institutional trust, academic or community participation and access to support mechanisms. Research on Central and Eastern Europe shows that mobility and settlement depend on legal status, institutional frameworks, labour-market opportunities and social networks rather than on formal residence alone (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2005; Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2019). Internationalisation also changes universities’ responsibilities toward foreign students (Kierznowski, 2017).

Perceived exclusion, weak institutional attachment and identity conflict may increase susceptibility to extremist or polarising narratives, although they do not automatically lead to radicalisation (Bakker & de Graaf, 2011; Ganor, 2021; Weine et al., 2016). Migration may also generate stress linked to dislocation, weak belonging or limited recognition

in the host society (Bhugra & Becker, 2005). Religious practice, cultural continuity and community belonging are not risk factors in themselves; they become relevant only when combined with isolation, exclusion, distrust or polarising information environments. This distinction is important in light of Polish research and public debates on Muslims and migrants in Poland (Szlachter et al., 2012; Narkowicz & Pędziwiatr, 2017; Dudzińska & Kotnarowski, 2019; Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2020).

Information-environment exposure refers to media sources, communication networks and geopolitical narratives through which students interpret Poland, Ukraine, Russia and the West. This dimension matters because Poland is a frontline EU and NATO state close to the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine. Studies on Russian political warfare, disinformation and diaspora-related influence show that external actors may exploit social divisions, minority environments or diasporic ties in Europe (Galeotti, 2019; Sencerman, 2018; Coolican, 2021; Bugajski, 2022; Bokša, 2019; NATO, 2024). These sources justify including external geopolitical narratives in the model, but they do not prove organised foreign influence among the respondents.

The broader security context is understood through institutional resilience. Polish scholarship on national security emphasises adaptability, threat recognition, institutional coordination and responses to changing political, social and informational conditions (Kitler, 2020; Wiśniewska, 2017; Sienkiewicz, 2015; Banasik, 2016; Wrzosek, 2017). Here, that perspective is narrowed to the university setting: integration, institutional trust and information resilience are treated as preventive variables. Poland's geopolitical position strengthens the relevance of this framework, but the article does not infer national-level threats from a single university sample (Kamiński & Śliwa, 2023; NATO, 2024).

European experiences with radicalisation and integration are used only as contextual reference points. They show that failed integration, marginalisation, online exposure and weak institutional trust may interact in radicalisation pathways, but they cannot be directly transferred to Poland or to the studied students (Bakker & de Graaf, 2011; Ganor, 2021; Weine et al., 2016; Mehra & Coleman, 2020).

The article distinguishes risk as a structural condition from suspicion as an individual judgement. It does not move from vulnerability indicators to accusations against individuals. The analytical model

is: integration gaps → weaker social embeddedness and/or perceived exclusion → reliance on narrower social and informational environments → exposure to polarising geopolitical narratives → need for non-stigmatising institutional safeguards.

This model guides the empirical analysis. The quantitative component identifies integration and vulnerability indicators, the qualitative component explains how respondents experience them, and expert interviews contextualise possible safeguards. The central argument is that universities should treat integration, institutional trust and information-environment resilience as preventive variables while avoiding collective attribution of risk based on nationality, religion, ethnicity or legal residence.

METHODOLOGY

The study applies an exploratory mixed-method single-case design to examine integration gaps, information-environment exposure and security-relevant vulnerability indicators among legally resident students from post-Soviet/CIS countries. Nationality, religion, ethnicity and legal status are not treated as risk categories.

Data were collected between October 2024 and April 2025 at a private university in Warsaw. It included 400 anonymous questionnaires; 300 were retained after screening as the valid quantitative sample. A purposive qualitative follow-up subsample of 186 respondents was selected, and 11 expert interviews provided contextual triangulation. Participants were BA or MA students legally resident in Poland; no recruitment involved law-enforcement, intelligence or migration-control channels.

The questionnaire covered language use, social embeddedness, university participation, co-ethnic networks, perceived exclusion, institutional support, migration intentions, religious and cultural practices, media use and geopolitical narratives. Integration was operationalised through language use, social contacts and institutional support; vulnerability exposure through isolation, exclusion, narrow social environments and external informational exposure.

Quantitative data were analysed descriptively and through cross-tabulations. Qualitative material and expert interviews were analysed

thematically. The study is limited by its single-institution design, self-reported data and exploratory framework. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; no identifiers were collected. The study involved no surveillance, intervention or data transfer to state institutions.

RESULTS: ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS

This section presents the findings in relation to the research problems. Survey data, qualitative follow-up material and expert interviews are used to explain observed patterns rather than to report questionnaire answers in sequence. The analysis distinguishes between the collected survey pool (N = 400), the valid quantitative sample (n = 300) and the qualitative follow-up subsample (n = 186).

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS AND SCOPE OF INFERENCE

Respondents came from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. They were aged 18–24 and enrolled in BA or MA programmes related to political science, international relations, security studies or diplomacy.

This academic profile is relevant for case selection, but it should not be read as evidence of future employment in diplomatic, military, intelligence or security institutions. The article does not examine respondents' career trajectories and does not infer future institutional access.

Table 1. Collected Survey Pool by Country of Origin and Gender, N = 400

Country of origin	Number of respondents	Percentage	Male	Female
Uzbekistan	136	34%	74%	26%
Kazakhstan	108	27%	70%	30%
Azerbaijan	72	18%	69%	31%
Tajikistan	48	12%	73%	27%
Turkmenistan	36	9%	68%	32%
Total	400	100%	71%	29%

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the empirical survey data collected in the study, N = 400.

The collected survey pool was screened before quantitative analysis. Only 300 questionnaires were retained as valid for statistical analysis. Therefore, Table 1 describes the broader collected pool, whereas descriptive and cross-tabulated results are based only on valid $n = 300$.

Table 2. Proportional Structure of the Valid Analytical Sample, valid $n = 300$

Country of origin	Number of respondents	Percentage
Uzbekistan	102	34%
Kazakhstan	81	27%
Azerbaijan	54	18%
Tajikistan	36	12%
Turkmenistan	27	9%
Total	300	100%

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the valid survey responses retained for quantitative analysis, $n = 300$.

Table 2 presents the country-of-origin structure of the valid analytical sample used for quantitative analysis. The table is based on the 300 questionnaires retained after screening for completeness, internal consistency and response plausibility.

Table 3. Qualitative Follow-Up Subsample by Country of Origin and Gender, $n = 186$

Country of origin	Number of respondents	Percentage	Male	Female
Uzbekistan	63	33.9%	75%	25%
Kazakhstan	50	26.9%	72%	28%
Azerbaijan	33	17.7%	68%	32%
Tajikistan	22	11.8%	77%	23%
Turkmenistan	18	9.7%	70%	30%
Total	186	100%	72%	28%

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the qualitative follow-up subsample selected from the survey participants, $n = 186$.

The qualitative subsample broadly reflected the collected survey pool, but its purposive design prevents statistical generalisation.

INTEGRATION PATTERNS AND INSTITUTIONAL EMBEDDEDNESS – P1

The findings show varied integration trajectories: some respondents viewed Poland as a stable place for long-term settlement, while others reported weaker embeddedness, limited Polish-language interaction or stronger reliance on co-ethnic networks. Religious/community participation and settlement intentions are treated as contextual integration indicators, not threat indicators.

Table 4. Religious/Community Participation and Settlement Intentions in the Collected Survey Pool, N = 400

Indicator	Category	n	% of N = 400	Analytical interpretation
Religious/ community participation	Regular attendance at local mosques	168	42%	community and identity- continuity indicator
Religious/ community participation	Participation mainly during major Islamic holidays	232	58%	lower-frequency re- ligious/community participation
Settlement intention	Intention to settle per- manently in Poland after graduation	396	99%	long-term integration relevance
Settlement intention	No such intention / unclear / other	4	1%	limited counter-category

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the collected survey pool and analytical categorisation of survey responses, N = 400.

Most respondents declared long-term settlement plans in Poland, making integration support institutionally relevant. Religious/community participation and employment patterns are treated as contextual integration indicators, not as evidence of isolation, radicalisation, organised sponsorship, illicit financing or recruitment.

VULNERABILITY INDICATORS: SOCIAL ISOLATION, PERCEIVED EXCLUSION AND INFORMATION EXPOSURE – P2

The analysis identified limited Polish-language interaction, reliance on co-ethnic networks, perceived barriers to advancement, low support awareness and exposure to external geopolitical narratives as

vulnerability indicators. They do not classify respondents as threats; their relevance lies in the cumulative overlap of weak integration, perceived exclusion and narrow information environments. The table reports minimum frequencies from documented quotations, not prevalence rates for the full qualitative corpus.

Table 5. Documented Minimum Frequencies of Qualitative Themes in the Follow-Up Subsample, n = 186

Coded theme	Documented respondents	Minimum n	Minimum % of n = 186	Equivalent % of valid n = 300	Analytical interpretation
Pragmatic settlement motivation	R47, R163	2	1.1%	0.7%	integration-relevant theme
Perceived barriers to advancement in Poland	R89, R152	2	1.1%	0.7%	social embeddedness indicator
Strong reliance on co-ethnic/community opportunity structures	R89, R152	2	1.1%	0.7%	vulnerability indicator when combined with weak integration
Explicit distrust toward Polish society	R78, R89	2	1.1%	0.7%	institutional trust indicator
Anti-Ukrainian framing	R121, R105	2	1.1%	0.7%	polarising geopolitical narrative indicator
Pro-Russian framing	R78, R121, R132	3	1.6%	1.0%	external geopolitical narrative indicator
Anti-Western framing	R132	1	0.5%	0.3%	polarising geopolitical narrative indicator
Overall polarising geopolitical framing, unique respondents	R78, R105, R121, R132	4	2.2%	1.3%	documented minimum, not total prevalence

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on thematic coding of the qualitative follow-up material, n = 186; equivalent percentages calculated against the valid analytical sample, n = 300.

Note: Categories are not mutually exclusive. The table reports minimum frequencies from cited quotations. Four respondents expressed polarising geopolitical framings, representing 2.2% of the qualitative subsample and 1.3% of the valid analytical sample.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND EXTERNAL NARRATIVE EXPOSURE – P3

P3 examined whether lower integration is linked to external informational exposure and polarising geopolitical narratives. Survey indicators ($n = 300$) were compared with qualitative codes ($n = 186$). In selected cases, perceived exclusion, distrust and community-based opportunity structures co-occurred with polarising framings. This supports the proposed vulnerability pathway but does not prove causality.

Table 6. Descriptive Association between Integration-Related Themes and Polarising Geopolitical Framings in Reported Qualitative Material

Respondent	Integration / embeddedness theme	Information / geopolitical theme	Interpretation
R89	Perceived barriers to advancement in Poland; expectation of stronger co-ethnic networks in Western Europe	No explicit pro-Russian statement in quoted material	social embeddedness concern
R152	Strategic relocation to Western Europe; community-based opportunity framing	Political influence framing	social and political opportunity framing
R121	Perceived unequal treatment compared with Ukrainians	Anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian framing	polarising geopolitical narrative
R78	Explicit distrust toward Polish society	Pro-Russian geopolitical framing	institutional distrust + external geopolitical alignment
R105	Perceived excessive privilege for Ukrainians	Anti-Ukrainian framing	polarising geopolitical narrative
R132	No direct integration complaint in quotation	Pro-Russian and anti-Western framing	external geopolitical narrative

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on thematic coding of anonymised qualitative follow-up material from the follow-up subsample, $n = 186$; the table reports only respondents quoted in the article.

The pattern in Table 6 supports H1–H4 at an exploratory level. In selected cases, perceived exclusion, distrust toward the host society and reliance on community-based opportunity structures co-occurred with polarising geopolitical framings. This suggests a possible vulnerability pathway, not a causal relationship.

QUALITATIVE MECHANISMS: SETTLEMENT, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GEOPOLITICAL FRAMING – P4

The qualitative material shows how respondents described settlement plans, social networks and geopolitical attitudes. R47 framed Poland as stable for family life and long-term settlement, while R89 linked future mobility to perceived barriers in Poland and stronger co-ethnic networks elsewhere in Europe. These statements were coded as pragmatic settlement motivation and perceived social barriers.

A documented subset, including R78, R105, R121 and R132, expressed pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western framings. These statements are treated as vulnerability signals, not as evidence of criminal intent, extremist affiliation, operational influence or collective threat status. They represented 2.2% of the qualitative subsample and 1.3% of the valid analytical sample.

The empirical material does not establish direct security threats, unlawful intent or foreign influence. It identifies four vulnerability categories: weaker social embeddedness, information-environment exposure, lower institutional trust and limited labour-market embeddedness. Limited Polish-language interaction, reliance on co-ethnic networks, perceived exclusion, distrust toward Polish society and weak labour-market embeddedness should be read as integration and institutional-trust challenges.

Pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western framings may indicate exposure to polarising geopolitical narratives, but they do not prove organised influence or intent to undermine the host state. Literature on Russian political warfare and diaspora-related influence supports this interpretation without implying that respondents are agents of foreign influence (Galeotti, 2019; Coolican, 2021).

European experiences are used only as mechanism-oriented reference points. They help identify preventive mechanisms, including integration deficits, perceived exclusion, online exposure, weak institutional trust, delayed institutional response, foreign influence and diaspora-related vulnerabilities. These factors may interact with extremist or polarising narratives, although they do not automatically lead to radicalisation (Bakker & de Graaf, 2011; Ganor, 2021;

Weine et al., 2016; Mehra & Coleman, 2020; Sencerman, 2018; Coolican, 2021; Galeotti, 2019).

The appropriate response is integration, trust-building, media literacy, voluntary counselling and non-stigmatising support, not broad monitoring of student communities. The study provides no evidence of organised sponsorship, intelligence recruitment, illicit financing or foreign-directed mobilisation.

Table 7. Comparative Context and Limits of Transferability

Context	Mechanism discussed in literature	Relevance for this article	Limit of comparison
Germany, France and the United Kingdom	integration deficits, social exclusion, weak institutional trust	helps interpret why integration and institutional attachment matter	different migration histories, colonial legacies and legal systems
Austria and selected individual Western European cases	rapid online radicalisation and failures of early intervention in individual cases	highlights the importance of media literacy and early support	cases concern criminal incidents, unlike the present student sample
Baltic states	Russian influence toward Russian-speaking diaspora and minority environments	relevant to information exposure and external geopolitical narratives	different ethnic, linguistic and historical context
Poland	emerging international student mobility from selected post-Soviet/ CIS countries	main empirical case of this article	single private university only; no national generalisation

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the cited comparative literature and the empirical scope of the study.

This comparison suggests that Poland may draw preventive lessons from European experience, but should not import assumptions about group radicalisation or collective suspicion. The appropriate response is early integration support, media literacy and institutional trust-building rather than broad monitoring.

EXPERT TRIANGULATION AND INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS

Expert interviews contextualised the findings, not as primary evidence about the student population. Experts identified non-coercive

university support — language and academic assistance, peer mentoring, counselling, anti-discrimination procedures and clear communication — as the main response to weak integration, low institutional trust and social isolation. They also stressed media literacy and reliable institutional communication, consistent with literature on foreign influence and information operations (Bugajski, 2022; Galeotti, 2019; Coolican, 2021).

The findings do not justify surveillance of student communities. Genuine security concerns should be addressed legally, proportionately and separately from academic support. Counter-terrorism and prevention literature supports early recognition of vulnerability pathways, but not the securitisation of all integration problems (Hoffman, 2017; Ganor, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how integration gaps among legally resident international students from selected post-Soviet/CIS countries relate to security-relevant vulnerability indicators in one university setting. The findings do not show that international students, Muslim students or students from post-Soviet/CIS countries constitute a security threat as a group. They show that weaker integration, limited social embeddedness, perceived exclusion and exposure to polarising information environments may form vulnerability pathways relevant to prevention.

The study found varied integration trajectories. Some respondents viewed Poland as a stable place for long-term settlement, while others reported weaker host-society embeddedness, reliance on co-ethnic networks, perceived barriers to advancement or distrust toward Polish society. A documented subset expressed pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian or anti-Western framings. These statements are treated as vulnerability signals, not as evidence of criminal intent, extremist affiliation, operational influence or collective threat status.

The findings offer exploratory support for the hypotheses: lower integration and external information exposure appear to overlap with elevated vulnerability indicators, while institutional support, peer integration and media literacy may reduce such exposure. Since

the study concerns one private university, the results should not be generalised to broader student populations. Universities should strengthen language assistance, peer contact, anti-discrimination procedures, counselling and information-environment resilience, while avoiding surveillance-based approaches. Future research should test the proposed vulnerability pathway across larger and more diverse samples.

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